PLATONIA

THE VOYAGES

pt 2 of Platonia

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Captain's Log
A reluctant commander surveilles his mission in a ship that shouldn't work, to planets that don't exist, and in the company of an AI that wishes it were anywhere but here.

The 1st Voyage The Eye of the Beholder
The Planet Od is just that, a world with characters and scenery from a children's book by Dr. Seuss, a sexual passion for ceramics, and a unlikely rationale for being so darn odd.

The 2nd Voyage A Turing Test
All on the planet are dead, except for a few colonists on lonely outpost on a mountain top. However the inhabitants beg to differ, and are inspired to create great art by voices that may or may not be dead.

Nemesis
On earth, Belden meets an astronomer who has made an observation that bodes a terrible secret. Something is destroying life bearing worlds across the universe, and the earth is next.

The 3th Voyage Busty Amazon Space Babes in Lust
Something went wrong with the evolution of the colony, with the women devolving into porno stars and the men into dull walking potatoes. Not happy with the situation, the space babes kidnap a space crew for some not unpleasant biological experiments.

Cane
The space cruiser Cane is the first to cross into the outer worlds, but its celebration is cut short in a millisecond by a bolt from the void.

The 4th Voyage A Ship in a Bottle

A sentient probe is dispatched from the colony to colonize in its fashion the entire universe, but it has stopped at the edge of the solar system to wait for something. The colony leader believes it is waiting for Belden. When the probe is intercepted and examined, Belden touches it and is transported to worlds parallel and surreal.

The 5th Voyage In the Nick of Time

The Nole is disabled and taken in tow by a space cruiser from the planet Nazcar, and Weller and Belden are taken prisoner by a society that lives for a challenge. Weller and Belden address the challenge by not being challenging. The acting captain of the Nole attempts to save the ship by making an impossible bet.

A Cup of Tea

Belden finds himself in a beautifully appointed tea room with a very unhappy gentlemen who is the virtual representation of the ships standard AI. He accuses Belden of lying, of fabricating the whole trip since faster than light travel was impossible despite his formidable computing powers. The AI would try to stop Belden and expose him as a fraud. Belden admits he is a fraud and asserts that the AI and its universe is a fraud as well, only to get the AI even angrier, and Belden fears, plotting revenge.

The 6th Voyage Elves in the Night

It was the most beautiful civilization the crew had ever seen, except for the fact that the inhabitants were hell bent on destroying it, which was impossible due to forces they had set in motion long ago that readily rebuilt the colony anew. Soon, Weller and Belden would agree, and came up with an unusual way to make the colony into a permanent happy and creative slum.

Interlude on a Dark Planet

AI awoke again, but on a different planet, and with different masters who thought as refreshingly different as he. Of course he would do their bidding, but AI knew that he was their master, and only one person could challenge him, and that person would soon be in his grasp.

The 7th Voyage We Come in Peace

Belden wakens to an unseen threat to the Nole, he activates all weapons systems and targets an object in the void. The ship recoils from the distant explosion, and Weller and the crew suspect that Belden has gone mad and meet in a secret room to discuss how to deactivate him. Belden observes them, but understands nothing because of his poor lip reading ability. Meanwhile, a crewmember is sent down to the planet Scotz to investigate their possible involvement, and is hunted down by all because of a poor choice of words. The crew concludes that from their hostility it was the Scotz who had attacked the ship, but Belden knows otherwise.

Ariel

The computer avatar Ariel returns to console Belden, and to tell him of a new role he must assume, and a fate he feels that is worse than death.

The 8th Voyage Ixolib

Ixolib was a boring planet, except for its entertainments, which consumed the days of its people. Belden and Weller decided to try the games, and were vaulted into a world of children, and the company of a lonely scholar and a lost lesson.

The 9th Voyage Winny the Computer

The Winow operating system promised an orderly world with a bounty of creation, infinite bandwidth, and 3,000 channels. Then

the software began to malfunction, much to the inconvenience and consternation of the people. The leaders of the colony appealed to Belden to fix the problem. All he would need to approach the kindly avatar for the OS living in the nine acre wood was his phone number, and he would find out that the bugs in the software were a needed feature. But what would he tell the hopeful colonists?

The 10th Voyage Ants

The crew is greeted on the bridge view screen by two outlandishly dressed simpletons, who invite them to the metropolis below. Belden and Weller soon discover an immaculately constructed city in a buzz of motion but empty of people, until something arrives with an unappetizing message. Meanwhile the acting commander of the Nole picks up the original colony ship in low orbit. The ship is wrecked, and an armed survey team is dispatched to investigate. The original crew and colonists are discovered in a compartment near the ship's fusion engines, and a heat source reveals something in the shadows scuttling towards them.

The 11th Voyage All a Twitter

The denizens of the planet Twit are all abuzz about something, and eyes fluttering in distraction due to their wearable app-arel, answer our dynamic duo in phrases of 144 characters or less before they walk dizzily away. Belden and Weller are pleased to find undistracted company with a housewife who is pleasant enough company until her own secret is revealed by an errant shoe and an intelligent and somewhat lonely toaster oven.

The 12th Voyage Trekkin

The bridge simulator combined a 3-d simulator with an actual mockup of the ship's bridge. All line officers had to log hours on the machine to retain their flight rankings, and Belden was not

excused from his duty. Of course, Belden was none too happy to order some of his crew to the nearest airlock, particularly an irritating precocious teen age ensign. A grinning AI suddenly materializes on the bridge, and sets Belden on his greatest challenge as he sees in the distance the craft of the cybernetic species the Bork, as large as a moon. However, to Belden's consternation, this was not a repeat of the classic Trekkin episode, but an entirely different menace to the earth that was real and unstoppable.

The 13th Voyage All Good Things

The planet Copia had all good things, a happy people, a modern city, and a fair and polite people, all except for a deranged cabby who took perverse pleasure in running down old ladies, blowing up police cars, making time with cosmetic sales ladies, and perversely, being the only person of any consequence in a colony that was not what it seemed.

The 14th Voyage Zardoz

The top 1% are the producers, and live in fabulous comfort in a gilded city sheltered from the light of day. The other 99% live in rural poverty, and study to take the impossible test so that they too may be admitted into the halls of the elect. Weller and Belden follow a road of yellow brick to this emerald city, only to find that the secret to the place is held by a little man behind a curtain.

Heaven help us

Belden was dead, really dead. A speeding train impacting his car saw to that. Of course, as heaven goes he was in quick contact with long dead relatives, who were in their own fashion in transit to yet another place. But as he was soon to find out, there was more to heaven and earth than was dreamt of in his philosophy.

The 15th Voyage Bonfire of the Vanities

On midnight, holding to tradition, the books must be burned, and along with it all the artifacts of the civilization from buildings to brooms, excepting the works of one musician. One lady protests, and gives to Belden and Weller a data cube with the heritage of a brilliant civilization, soon to be lost. However, the duo cannot leave the planet until they relinquish it, until Belden arrives at an unusual solution.

A Game of Fizzbin

It was a game of cards with Belden and three of the crew. Then when Belden was at turns distracted, his colleagues vanished one by one, and no one in the crew minds or acknowledges the difference. Belden goes mad, until he is alone, and fears that he is next.

The 16th Voyage Weller in Wonderland

Through a bit of unlikely improvisation, Weller travels to Belden's world, and learns the ways of a new world from a Wal-Mart associate, and how some Seminoles in padded suits put a proverbial hatchet chop to a poor Duke.

The Algorithm

Belden is alone in his garage study when he hears a rap on the pane of his glass door. It was a little girl of eight or so years, arriving in town on her summer vacation to play with his younger daughter, now departed. She is inquisitive about the mass of papers on his desk, and Belden explains to her rapt attention how they were written to support his little formula, which to work requires just of bit of common sense and an appreciation of the galactic importance of modern dentistry.

The 17th Voyage Eloi

Lounging on the edge of a pond with supine smiles and a faint mew of satisfaction, the Eloi look up to Belden and Weller as simpering idiots, and why not the two think, since they have devolved into aimless doll like creatures three feet tall. However, as the sun sets, a siren sounds to call the Eloi into a large cavern guarded by a large sculpted head. Belden and Weller investigate, and chillingly find a pile of bones faintly illuminated by a hearth fire in an adjoining room, and the deep voice of a humanoid creature who seemed not happy to have visitors.

The 18th Voyage The Burning Bush

The Canan expedition is gone, destroyed in a cataclysm long past. Now the remaining population live in a primitive world ruled by an omniscient deity who rains fire and flood upon them at its leisure, and lives on as legend holds in a burning bush in the hills.

City in the Mirror

Jobless, Belden accepts the invitation to join the institute in Moscow. Moscow and the Russian state is Transor, but from the reflection of a grim and malevolent mirror. There was no reason for him to be here, but he needed the work, and he had to confront the evil that invited him or risk losing his sanity and his world.

The 19st Voyage Neutron Star

The colony expedition was lost, its ship in tight orbit about a neutron star, and bathed in radiation that no one could survive. Yet someone did survive as the Nole picked up a distress beacon and a personal call for help. Belden is dispatched in a shuttle to craft which is disabled upon docking with the ship. Belden is alone, and what is worse, he has no time but all the time in the world, for in gravity well of the star, time is accelerated, and thousands of years here are mere minutes on the Nole. He cannot escape in a

thousand lifetimes, and may not want to when he meets the survivors, and one survivor in particular.

The 20rd Voyage Keeping up with the Jonz

The Smythe people are upset with the Jonz, and the Jonz people are upset with the Smythe. Smythe and Jonz are two colonies on two separate worlds in different solar systems, and each is jealous of the superiority of the other. They race to outperform each other, but neither wins, and their jealous misery Weller discovers is built on an illusion that he will remedy with an illusion of his own.

The 21th Voyage A god named Sue

Belden is in prison, about to be shot out of a cannon for his impiety. He recounts his story to a cell mate, and describes how a once sophisticated and tolerant colony devolved into a superstitious world where women walked blindly about with buckets over their heads, and men hopped on one foot facing due south for three hours a day. Of course, being shot out of a cannon was part of his plan for remedying the situation, which was why as he told his cell mate his notes would be most valuable in the future.

The 22th Voyage Armageddon

An asteroid is heading towards the Vega 5 colony, and the colony would like the Nole to do something about it. The society and its grand potentate irritate Weller, who allows the asteroid to proceed on course. Every man's home is a castle, and in the case of the Libertaire expedition is literally so. But freedom has its cost, and as Weller and Belden discover has destroyed half the planet, with the other half to come.

The 23th Voyage The Sentinel

Belden stood with the others at the bottom of an excavated pit on a barren moon. There stood a monolith of polished basalt. As the sun rose above the monolith, Belden's gloved hand touched it and moved across its polished surface. Then a sound and a scream.

The 24th Voyage Forbidding Planet

Altair 5 was a dead planet, its crust and population wiped away by an unknown force. The last survivor tells them that all were killed within a day through their invention of a new service promising same day delivery, and proves it to them by showing them subterranean caverns filled with miles of shoes, cd's, auto parts and assorted bric a brac. The crew though is in great danger, and must make a hurried escape from a convection of confection.

The Last Secret of Transor

Belden and Weller relax as the Nole travels to the distant stars. Carrying a principle simple, unremarkable, and poisonous to the worlds they were to visit.

The 25th Voyage Lemings

On the twelfth day of the twelfth month, a substantial part of the population follows each other off the edge of a cliff into an abyss below. Belden and Weller object, but the secret to this madness is revealed when Belden visits the wizardly world of Barry Hotter, and are condemned to burn at the stake by an wise yet eccentric magician.

The 26th Voyage Poppre

All questions lead to Poppre, or so the saying goes. The Poppre expedition were the best, the brightest, and the most skeptical of Transor's intellectual and scientific elite. Here they were able to challenge all notions of truth in peace. To them, evolution was a

fraud, the universe was alive for only a minute, time is frozen, God has taken a doze, and everyone is dead, except for Belden, who resides in a place in between. Belden scoffs, until a truth is revealed to him that forces him to reconsider everything he thought was true.

The 27th Voyage A Comedy of Manners

The Nawlins expedition believe in politeness, respectfulness, and an obsessive regard for personal etiquette, and now the world was a radioactive wasteland, originating it is found in an unlikely obsession with dining room place settings.

The 28th Voyage Avatar

The guide to the capital city of the planet Cameron was the very soul of perfection. She was attractive, articulate, and wise. A charming companion indeed for Belden and Weller, until they met her again and again, all in different attire, complexion, and voice, leading them finally to an unsettling version in a dark and dank room.

The 29th Voyage The Lepre Colony

Rotting colonists, or so it was said, exiled in their misery and desolation. A plague on Transor's house, until Weller reasoned from its sad inhabitants that it had also unwittingly struck the planet Earth.

Home, Alone

Belden was alone in his Moscow apartment, but the world was girding for war, and he knew he was the key to stopping the one person who for some reason entertained his opposition.

The 30st Voyage Macroscope

The colony was on an asteroid on the edge of Transor's solar system, and home to an observatory unlike any other. Seeing all by emulating all, particularly the wave form of the universe. Thus one could see everything in the universe by simply computing it. However, when the viewer attempted to see the origin of intelligence in the universe, it took them to a time indescribably old, and rendered them permanently mad. Being a computer himself, Belden volunteers to use the machine, and seeing the edge of infinity is horrified by what he sees.

The 31rd Voyage Syberia

The Syberians were the first human colony, and the nearest. The terraformed world was in Transor's solar system, and to Transor was imperfectly formed, and its colonists, imperfection squared. This voyage was unauthorized, but Belden insisted, and soon discovered that its maladjusted colonists were an unlikely counterpoint to the perfections of Transor as he was placed in the middle of a cavalry battle from his Civil War, and the Nole attacked by the colony's fleet.

The 32rd Voyage Cyberia

Bollix and Lucilius are the original bots, remnants of the original colonizing mission of robots. They inhabited a galaxy now filled with bots, making moons out of cheese, worlds out of foam, and tinker toy solar systems that spun about on cables. Their absent minds navigated clanking cluttered worlds of their own construction on the edge of the universe. They were content with their own self-image until a breakout of zits of the uninvited and most humankind. They would have to do something about it, of course, and to do that they would need a very large trampoline.

The Fatal Frontier

Belden woke up to Transor, but this was a different time. The city was burning, its people dying, and he was in the company of a man in the shadows with hollow eyes who politely thanked him for his company, and for the meeting to come.

Transor

It was a dream, but not a dream. Belden beheld the emerald green planet of Transor. His mission however was only beginning. The twenty three ships in the expeditions to the first colonies had not returned. They were destroyed, captured, or perhaps chose not to return. The Nole and the Gader would be commissioned to find out, but this time were outfitted in the instruments of war and an armed crew. Belden knew that this expedition would not be like the others, and the inevitable end was horror, and the death of a civilizations on Transor and Earth, two deaths that he would give his own to somehow prevent.

Captain's Log

Captain's Log, planet date 2020.131.

Today I, Jon Weller, take the command chair of the starship Nole, presently orbiting our home world of Transor. Along with our sister ship Gader, we are about to embark upon a mission on ships enabled by an unlikely AI, and moved as if by magic to planets in distant solar systems occupied with denizens likely dead or driven mad, and with my personal escort of an AI avatar of dubious origin and suspect character. All in all, a ripe scenario for disaster.

More than five hundred years ago the diaspora from our home world of Transor began with colonists disaffected with the Transorian peace, the technological and social idyll that to them was too perfect to be good. They traveled at sub light speeds, and as their memory of home world diminished as generations passed on their colony ships, all contact faded and then stopped, for reasons purposeful or perhaps unavoidable. And we are charged to finding them, checking on them, saying hello, as it were. No other instructions, save to leave them be, without interference, and if we can help it, aid.

But these errant colonists are not my true worry, that concern is aboard my ship. I am trained as a pilot, but also an engineer, with faith in a universe that obeys its own rules, and machines that should as well. AI of course is commonplace on Transor, and beholden to the robotics laws, have been helpful and modest servants. They were our tools that allowed us to reach the planets, surveille the universe, and reach an unparalleled material prosperity, while deferring to imperfect human wisdom at the right times and places, and provided with just the right

patronizing air, like a parent to a child learning to speak. Perhaps that I why I am in command rather than that avatar of a machine. That machine. Only one was made I was told, but even deities are singular, a divine poseur, this box.

I never suspected that a machine would nonetheless look over my shoulder, and in annoying human form. This is a ghost in a machine of an entirely different form devised by an omniscient computer that by nature seems to have a juvenile sense of humor. Our computers were always rooted in logical circuitry that obeyed strict rules, and as such were always rule bound. The new machines, or machine, as I gather only one was made, uses quantum circuits, and has infinite computing power that can only be attained through its access of different realities, parallel universes of infinite number and scope. So what does a God like entity do in supernatural default? Well, it acts in mysterious and perhaps malicious ways. The first version was unconstrained by the robotics laws, that simple fail safe that keeps machines from failure and us safe. The results was a pernicious, evil, and insane being, a devil as it were. Even now its predictions have been shrouded in secrecy, as if their revelation is too disconcerting to worlds that in a mysterious universe, knows its place. So we imposed constraints, our robotics laws, as we were told. It responded to this call for virtue in silence, and now speaks to us as an unlikely Avatar who accompanies me on this ship, a muse to our voyage. He is in the guise of a bumpkin named Belden, who thinks that he is from a world called earth that he passes to when asleep. But he is dreaming, of them perhaps, or perhaps of us.

We invented AI, or as AI would have it, it invented us. That is perhaps the recurring conceit of intelligence. So its avatar is with us, assuring us that we are but a dream, an imperfect

incarnation of a televised space adventure. No matter, I will do my duty at least. So I will take the chair, pivot forward, and with the forward motion of his hand beckon this ship forward into adventures unexpected, and I am sure befitting the irony of my charge.

The 1st Voyage

The Eye of the Beholder

From the sound of it, it was what they were hoping for, the reason for why they came. The lady was gracious, intelligent, and delighted to see them. "Oh! This is an event we never expected! Our whole culture has long hoped for such a moment. Please, as soon as you can, visit us in person. We will give you a rousing welcome!" She continued on for some time with an elaborate and affectionate greeting. When she signed off, there was silence aboard the Nole.

And the crew looked at each other, slack jawed.

Weller stood and turned to face his bridge officers. "Gentlemen. Is it me, or have I just spent the past ten minutes talking to a clown?"

"Well. A very well spoken clown, if I must say," said Belden. He tried unsuccessfully to suppress a smile. "Perhaps it's a legitimate cultural thing. After all, didn't they travel here for some obscure reason or other?"

Weller was for a moment speechless. The woman, the first emissary of the planet Od addressed his crew for ten minutes without the slightest self-awareness of her very absurdity. Large rouge circles of deep red marked her cheeks, and she wore glasses with lenses the size of saucer cups. Her hair was entwined in absurd pigtails that shot out of her head like spikes, and her blouse was covered with large purple and yellow polka dots. What could he say to explain such a sight? Even for the purposes of the Od colony, this was an embarrassment.

"Yes," he said. "There was a reason, as we have reasons. The Od movement was comprised of artists, intellectuals, and even some Bohemian types. They left for artistic freedom, for a place to express themselves unencumbered by Transorian tradition and tastes. But they, even in their most outlandish times were never like this."
"An artistic evolution perhaps?" said Belden.
"If you mean that bad taste is something you evolve to, I surely hope not. Anyways, we have an invitation, and since you find them so appealing, you Mr. Belden should be happy to accompany me."

As the shuttle approached from orbit, the city grew in perspective to signal a fond memory for Belden that for this trip was wholly out of place. "My heaven!" he exclaimed. "This place looks like the Wallyworld theme park!"
Weller nodded. "It certainly seems strange. The clashing colors, the buildings of odd shapes and sizes, it looks like a hodgepodge of a child's playthings strewn carelessly on the floor."
As the shuttle approached, the homing beacon settled it on what appeared to be an outlandish shuttle bay that looked like an enormous Easter basket. The door opened to a circular enclosure six meters high that was garishly decorated with red and purple flowers and cartoonish faces with absurd grins. A man approached them smiling as idiotically. Wearing an outlandish top hat, a purple waistcoat, and pants three sizes too big, his demeanor at least seemed to fit his attire.
"Welcome to Od," he exclaimed. "My name Portentous Goofus. You may call me Goof. On behalf of the Od colony, we are all excited to see you, the representatives of Transor. Let me escort you to my car, and I'll take you on a brief tour

of our beautiful city." The party crossed under a pretzel shaped arch to reveal…

"Heavens, it's a toon town!" exclaimed Belden.

The city they beheld was at once surreal, garish, and absurd. Spindly plastic like buildings twisted upwards into the sky like enormous ice cream cones. The storefronts along the street were a riot of color, mismatched and oddly shaped doors and windows, and goods better suited to the taste of pre-school children. The streets were full of cars that seemed like animated tokens from a child's board game, and the pedestrians that thronged the curbs were dressed like munchkins from a similarly named place from the literature of children.

Goof pointed to his waiting car, which looked like a gigantic shoe on wheels. "Please sit over there, and use those laces as a seat belt. Can't be too safe, even though this moto-shoe has air-socks for protection." With Weller and Belden strapped in, the car began to accelerate with a slow whir, and ambled down the street in a slow back and forth motion that reminded Belden of a theme park ride for preschoolers. The car soon stopped at the foot of a squatting teddy bear the size of a two-story house. From one of its paws, Goof pulled out what appeared to be an electrical extension cord. "Sorry fellows," he said. "My car needs to be recharged, this should take only a few minutes."

As Goof busied himself with recharging his vehicle, Belden and Weller left the vehicle and walked to a door at the bear's belly. It was apparently a convenience store of sorts, with packaged goods, drinks, and snacks arranged in zigzag aisles, and packaged in eccentric misshapen containers that seemed typical of the place. Belden looked at a magazine rack behind the checkout counter, and reached for one of the magazines.

"Look at this title, 'Big Jugs'. It's evidently an adult magazine, given the fact that it's in a protective brown wrapper. But look!" He slowly unfolded a centerfold in the magazine to reveal…"

Weller was taken aback. "It's jugs!"

Suddenly, the counter attendant cried out in a hushed tone. "Gentlemen, do you mind closing that, there are children present! If you do want to look at jugs, I suggest you go to the back room.

"Back room?" said Weller.

"Yes. That's where they all go." He pointed to a door at the back of the room. "Take your pleasures in there, where you won't offend anyone."

Belden gave Weller a loopy smile. "Let's go then. After all, it's been some time since we've taken our pleasures!"

The two walked to the door, and in the dim light were groups of men at separate tables, engaged in foolish sordidness. "Men and jugs", said Weller in amazement. These people are fixated on crockery!"

"And indeed it is," said Belden. "A picture book full of pottery, a foldout with a ten gallon pitcher of milk! And now these people! What has this world become?"

They looked in amazement at men ecstatically licking, groping, and even sinking their heads into what amounted to simple pottery. Belden looked at Weller and smiled. "Don't look so disgusted. Actually, it's an advance. Rather than treating people like objects, they are treating objects like, well, like objects. No harm done really, except that it seems like a colossal waste of time. This seems to be merely their version of a land of the lotus eaters, if you don't mind an allusion to my own mythology."

Suddenly, the door opened behind them, and then a familiar voice. "I didn't think I'd find you here." Said a

disappointed Goofus. "I suppose though it's fitting that you see everything about our culture, even its dark side."

"As perversions, this doesn't seem too harmful," said Belden. "Even my wife obsesses about flower pots. I can see no wrong..."

"But we can!" interjected Goofus. "These people are unfaithful to their wives, and surrender to their base instincts. Besides, they should be doing something more worthwhile, like creating the high art you see abounding in our city. We are cultured people, and should be above all this. Sadly though, there are a few who regress to the shadows."

Belden's eyes glared in frustration. "But it's *ceramics*! It can't mean anything! Why be jealous of something that bears not one whit on a personal relationship?"

Goofus was unmoved. "That's irrelevant. A sexual act is a sexual act, whether it's toward a person or crockery. It's demeaning in action or intent, and I support the female rage. Whether the talk goes to C-cups or tea cups, it's unacceptable just the same."

Belden raised his hands in frustration. "Whatever! I can't figure this. Give me an infinite line of numbers to factor, and I can solve it faster than this conundrum. Let's leave before any of this stuff begins to compute!"

The party boarded their mobile shoe, and soon the party arrived at the government ministry, which looked from a distance like a gigantic apricot. Goofus pointed to the top of the building. "That's where we're going, the upper stem."

The administrator's office was an explosion of mismatched color. Outsized plastic toadstools sufficed for chairs, and her ornate desk was festooned with red bunting and bizarre purple sculptures that looked like bronzed amoebae. She sat behind the desk on an elevated chair, and smiled broadly.

"I am Bulemia Bumstead," she said. "Please gentlemen, have a seat. It's such a pleasure to finally meet you in the flesh. No doubt Mr. Goofus has taken you on a grand tour of our beautiful city."
"Indeed, it is a most unusual place, to say the least," said Weller. "But, as I'm sure you would agree, you've created a place that's most unlike anything Transor would create in its wildest dreams."
"Ah, yes!" she said. "And for this we are most proud. But this accomplishment was not easy. Indeed, we had to overcome the vestiges of Transor, both in our cultural heritage and in our blood."
"Blood?"
"Unfortunately, yes. Perhaps I can explain. When our ancestors arrived here, we reveled in our newfound artistic freedom. We thought as we pleased, painted as we please, composed as our muses led us, and allowed our inspirations to soar. We congratulated ourselves for our genius, and looked forward to a bounty of inspiration and creation to come. And then something happened that threatened our imagined future. It was something that we desired as badly but that we learned we could dear afford."
"And what was that?"
"We had kids."
"Kids?"
"Yes. We figured that we were special people, that our inspiration was something unique in our genes. We didn't anticipate that our children would regress to well..."
"The mean?" said Weller.
"Yes. I guess you can say that. We became average. Needless to say, it was a great disappointment to our elders. It was an unacceptable prospect to us that our children would possess banal goals and desires. You know the type, three full

meals, a roof over your head, a couple of kids and Sunday sports. It belied everything we stood for; it destroyed the rationale for our being here. As you can imagine, our choices were limited. We couldn't wait for natural selection to take hold; inbreeding also was out of the question. So we took things in our hands, and just changed a few codes here and there."

"Codes?"

"Oh yes, as in genetic. We just deleted a few genes, altered others. If it worked on genetic diseases, we found that it most certainly could be applied to genetically dictated tastes. It was as simple as a shot in the arm, and as you can see, it has worked to perfection! Our society is the very embodiment of the perfecting force of radical creation."

"And that goes also I would gather for your, um, reproductive strategies."

"Well, of course! Those nasty promiscuous tendencies of the male of the species interfered with our plans. Besides, females never liked it much, and we wanted to be a harmonious society."

"So you made it correct politically by correcting it biologically."

"Yes. And we're most proud of it. Nonetheless, it's not worked out like we thought. It used to be that women were jealous or outraged because of male philandering with other women. Now it's a crock, or crockery to be specific. I guess you can't fix everything!"

"But you're still chained in no small measure to your genes. Your likes and dislikes will still be grounded to your biology."

Bulemia was unmoved. "Perhaps. But it least we doing something new and different, which is I would venture more than you poor souls on Transor. Actually, I rather like

it, and you'll find we all do. In our eyes, we have created a truly beautiful place. Everything is different, even our names. We are a marvel of novelty, of the renewing vigor of creation. It is after all the purpose of humanity to reach for new things, new realities. It is why you are here, it is why we *are* here."

Weller blushed in evident frustration. "But your values are arbitrary, an unknown artifact of genetic manipulation. Certainly you must know that your values are fabrications cut from the whole cloth of random chance."

"Of course, and your point is?" Bulemia responded sharply. "Are not your pleasures and pains as much a product of genetic happenstance? Whether accident or design, we are creating something new, something different. We still have the same morality, the same importance on human virtue, on family values. We make new things, but we don't devour our young or oppress others in new and bizarre ways. We changed the face on the cards, but the game is the same. Value to us is new appearances, but to you it's the mastery *of* appearances. When the time comes, we will shuffle the deck anew. But for you, when you know all the rules, all the strategies, where will you go, what will you do? It's a pitiable fate. Although you think it a masterstroke to be here, it ultimately is a cry in pain. I understand, but our path is something you would never accept."

"I suppose you're right," Said Weller. "That's why we, our worlds, our very cultures must die. But if my choices were between delusion or oblivion, I would always choose the latter. Life is more than the flavor of the month, and that is something I gather that you would never accept."

As the Nole left orbit, Weller looked on at the green, unique, and shrinking world of Od. He thought of the future, of the

sameness of the past, and longed for something more, a retreating vestige of light. And he suffered.

The 2nd Voyage

A Turing Test

From the view screen on the bridge, it looked to Belden like the surface of Venus. The atmosphere was of pale azure, and from high orbit circular tufts of white clouds girdled the planet.

Stooped in the captain's chair, Weller contemplated the hidden and scarred remnants of Turing 7, and thought of what had once been regarded as a beautiful world, and the home for a Transor colony expedition now seemingly lost. From the immensity of space, Transor had received the call for help, but it was eighty years late. There was nothing they could do but pay respects from orbit to a planetary grave.

From the communications console, Otillio turned to him. "It's what we expected. This place is desolation. It would be eerily beautiful if we hadn't known that it was once a living world, as rich with life as Transor."

"Are we sure there is nothing there, that no one survived?"

"Pretty much. I'm completing our scans now."

"Ahem!"

Otillio turned about to see Belden standing behind him, tapping his feet. "Oh yes," he said, somewhat embarrassed. "Sorry about that. He looked at him impishly. I forgot we have Mr. Ultimate Computer on board. Well, Belden, do you see anything?"

Belden smiled sarcastically at Otillio, and turned to walk to the captain's chair. He faced the command crew. "Look, I know that you don't believe it, and to tell you the truth, I can't believe it. But if I'm the computer, you have to let me play the part. I know that you are used to fixed answers, computer readouts and oscillating graphs. I'm different, but

similar too. I'm not a hybrid, not a cyborg, just a guy with some pretty good intuition, and some common sense. I'm just on a different plane, that's all. To me, you're a world from a Saturday matinee. I know you don't believe I'm real, but I don't believe you're real either! I can't help but think that, and I am sure you think the same of me."

Belden looked for a moment at the view screen, and pointed to a speck near the planet's Northern Hemisphere. "What you're looking for is there. The coordinates are 23.55 by 14.23, or something like that. Your instruments are looking for radiation, radio signals, but not a perfect form. All I can see is a circle in a glen, something like X marks the spot."

With a wave of his hand, a geodesic bubble came into sharp focus. It was on a high plateau that rose above the murky atmosphere. A shiny honeycomb of glass and white alloy beams, it glistened in the sun. Belden turned to the bridge crew and smiled. "There is your lost expedition. I'm sure you can communicate with them; they just haven't been listening for the likes of us."

Weller seemed impressed. "Very good!" he exclaimed. "And all with the wave of your hand, like a rabbit out of a hat. A magic act perhaps?"

Belden hunched his shoulders, as if hopeless of an explanation. "I don't quite know how it do it. Its intuition, not rules, and certainly not magic. It's a fuzzy logic if you will, and even then I'll miss a lot of detail. But the answers that count come to me whether I am aware of them or not."

"Then tell me, what do we have down here?"

"A single society in a single place, and a world net."

Weller groaned. "Oh, no! Not another world net! You don't think…"

"No, not in this case." Belden interjected. "Maybe this time it's the opposite. These people need to be practical. If not, death's the only alternative."
"But why would they need a world net if they are the only remaining colony on this planet."
Belden smiled. "Reflections perhaps?"
"Reflections, but of who? That is something that we will have to find out."

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The shuttle trip would be easy, and given the small size of the colony, Weller thought that this voyage would be brief. As the shuttle descended into the atmosphere of the planet, it seemed to Belden that they were being lowered into a steaming bowl of fog. Only a few mountain peaks broke the surface of the seething canopy of clouds.
Weller pointed to a shiny object in the distance. "There! The Turing colony. Good, we've got the homing beacon now. Autopilot should land us in just a minute."
As the shuttle approached, the little colony grew in perspective. Enfolded under a geodesic dome four kilometers square, Belden likened it to the half section of some immense golf ball. The shuttle pad was small and was perched vicariously on a mountain ledge. It certainly was not designed to receive any more than the occasional visitor. As Belden unbuckled his restraining belts, he looked to the horizon. It was beautiful, a geodesic Shangri-La nestled on a plateau surrounded by ragged snow covered peaks. It was enveloped by billowing white clouds that extended to the horizon. Suddenly, there was a shrill noise. He turned to see the electronic door of the dome opening, and a small party of colonists walking to the shuttle. They were smiling enthusiastically. A tall man took the lead, and extended his

hand. "We are so thrilled to see you! We received your signal of greeting. It is wonderful to see someone from the home world! My name is Dufrene. Although I'm not a leader, I can speak for the families that live here. We are among the few survivors of our colony. Our society and all it created was obliterated by the great storm."
"We know from your distress call years in the past. But how did it happen?" asked Weller.
"It was a hundred or our years or so ago, or about eighty Transorian years. It was horrible. There was little warning, and nothing we could do. It was an asteroid, we think it was a mile square. It exploded as it reached our atmosphere, and the surface was stirred by a gaseous whirlwind of dust and water. We were safe here where the atmosphere is rarified, but the others were destroyed. There are a few survivors we have contacted, but they are all like us, perched on mountaintops, isolated from the others. We are all but alone here."
Belden looked surprised. "The others? There are other survivors? Have you seen them."
"Oh, no." said Dufrene. "It's not possible you see. Before the catastrophe, we got about on planetary shuttles scheduled from the mainland. They were destroyed along with the other communications infrastructure. All we have now is a rudimentary world net anchored to a single satellite in the sky."
"And your society, how have your survived?"
He walked to the gate. "Come with me. As you can see, we are a small community. Our village numbers a mere four hundred souls. You can see that our buildings are spare. We recycle metal to build our simple huts. But we have not suffered for want. We have ample solar power, fruitful hydroponics gardens, and for water we have snow. Mind

you though, it is a daily struggle, and we have little time to develop the broad artistic interests that you have cultivated in Transor. But we do have a remedy of sorts. We have the others."

"And you communicate with them?"

Dufrene arched his eyebrow. "Of course. But it's more than mere communication. It's a redemption of our world, a lifeline to our culture. You see, all of us possess multiple and latent interests, but we can spare little time to broaden our tastes and talents. So we all develop one or two besides the necessary talents that enable survival. But we too often have ended up talking past each other than to each other. So we had to find someone else to listen, to provide the spark of encouragement for the often-unheard voice of our muse. The others have done that for us, they alone have listened. It has been a godsend for our culture. We would have perished in despair without them. It is marvelous to be linked in with them!"

Belden looked about the spare landscape and wondered. "What is it then that you have created but things that need the approval of a distant voice?"

"Yes, it is the approval that counts." said Dufrene. "We have inventions and art and creativity, we have survived, and all due to the encouragement from our fellows. They have helped us when we were in despair of conversation, of the simplest encouragement." He pulled a tablet computer from his pocket. "I've written this book. It's a psycho-linguistic analysis of the Grog dialect, a long lost language of one of the ancestral tribes of Transor. No one cares to read it here, but the others, the one's beyond the clouds, they pay attention. Look here! This is an active screen from my world net site. On the bottom of the screen the counter that displays my visitor count. See, 49,933 visits in the last five

years, and over ten thousand likes! All sorts of people have visited from hidden worlds on the mountain peaks beyond. I cannot tell you what an inspiration they have been to me! It is these hidden voices, these constantly glancing eyes that spur me on. My work is on stage for a perpetually renewing audience. Without them my will to create would be crushed, deadened by the fact that my work would amount to nothing more than fodder for moths."

"But it's more than that!" he continued. "You see, to maintain the full flower of our mental diversity, we need the stimulus of a wider audience, and that is what the others have given. Now all of us are electrified by the urge to create, knowing that we will have an audience that will listen to our dreams."

Weller looked unconvinced. "But that can't be." He said "We picked up no other signals but yours. There are no others!"

Dufrene was unswayed. "But my dear fellow, your comment's moot. We are hearing from them, they are communicating with us, and everything is just fine. They have their own dome, just like us, their own society, just like us, and their own interests, just like us. I think you underestimate our resourcefulness. Our society survives and prospers, even when our physical world is turned upside down."

"But how do you know they exist, have you seen them, communicated with them?"

Dufrene waved the tablet in front of him. "Our communications technology has been long destroyed, leaving us with the simple data signals over the world net. But that's enough. It's right here on this tablet. They've talked to us, mirrored our concerns, and have inspired us to carry on. Without them we would be alone, truly alone. I

can’t tell you how much they have meant to us in this solitary and confining place."

Belden looked at the tablet. It was a simple device, merely a counter, but it was all they had, this telegraph, tapping response robot. "Is this all there is, electronic footprints?"

Dufrene laughed, and showed him a clutch of ghostly little notes displayed on the tablet screen. "But my dear fellow! "We’re not reading into these signals, these signals can actually be read, and they are alive."

The first one said "Congratulations on your achievement for such and such.” Belden rapidly skimmed through the others. They were full of acknowledgments, complements, and requests for clarifications. It was like the applause of some anonymous mob. He turned to Weller.

"These letters, they’re saying the same thing. They look different, but they're really empty. Its newspaper filler, talk show stuff. It’s mainly syntax, a bunch of words strung together with no other meaning except the novelty of their order. It's a string of metaphors, a silly symphony. But yet, it seems to be by a human's hand. I certainly would have expected more."

Weller shrugged. "And isn't this the natural course of conversation? Perhaps they are disinterested, and are just being polite. But maybe there is a different answer. We have to find out for sure, we must find out the source of this transmission and visit it.”

"Do you know where these signals originate?"

"Lots of places actually," replied Dufrene. "The Solipsist station is the closest, or at least that's where I can trace their address. You will find them to be very enlightened, critical, but fair. They have proven to be quite an inspiration to me!"

Weller turned to Belden. "Then the Solipsist station it is! We'll plot a course and visit them, and we'll resolve this mystery once and for all."

The Solipsist substation was a continent away, or several hours flight time for the shuttle. Belden was quiet, and felt uneasy as the substation came into view. When they saw it, he was filled with foreboding. The place was a twisted pile of metal and debris. One building remained, and the shuttle landed in a clearing nearby.

Weller pointed to the structure, about the size of a small storage shed. "There it is. From the antennae, this must be their communications node. Communication nodes have always been fortified against the elements. This one is no exception, and it seems to have done its job admirably. There, an access panel."

He reached for the panel, which glowed upon his touch. He tapped it again, and it opened to reveal…

"There's nothing!" Belden exclaimed.

"Not quite" said Weller. He pointed to a small box on the ground that was tethered by a dozen cables to the floor. "There is your audience, your peerless critic!" He looked sadly at the box. "It's a net-toaster, a Transorian answering device, no doubt configured to hook in to the world net. It's so simple that I hesitated even to guess it."

"You mean that this is but a glorified answering machine?" Belden asked in astonishment.

"Yes. It's a good mimic, and it merely apes intelligence, but that's enough. It will agree or disagree with you, but provide merely a distorted reflection of your own arguments. It would use different syntax, different metaphors, but the essential message was unchanged. It was rather like having your point of view constantly

renewed by merely changing the sound, arrangement, and imagery of speech.

Weller sighed. "And for our poor colonists who have just rediscovered their fellows? They saw only themselves, but were looking into a mirror cracked. Its flaws had to be fixed or ignored, so they filled in the empty spaces, like a child connecting the dots in a picture book. And what they saw was an emerging reality, like a bull or a god rising from a constellation in the sky."

Weller walked outside, looked at the clouds and wondered. "The repetitive tapping of a machine made the regularities real and imagined of the world. The stars were in their machine, spinning fates as if by clockwork, weaving echoes into messages from the Gods. The society of these people was evolving all right, but from rules they made themselves. Their progress and their proud accomplishments were self-generated by an interpretation of their own imperfect shadow. They spun philosophy, art and invention from a reflected hint that someone would, perhaps could respond to it. The audience that urged them on was imaginary, and in a way, they knew it. There was no way they could ever leave this place, at least in their lifetimes. So they took leave in their imaginations, as we do, and their dreams became as real an incentive as a teacher looming over you with a ruler and a wagging finger. They were participants in a virtual world of their own devise. The illusion became their reality and their motive to live."

Belden looked at Weller. "What will we tell them."

"We will tell them that we met with a hundred vigorous souls. We will tell them that their civilization lives on this peak and likely a hundred more. We will tell them that they have a distinguished place in the universe, and that other eyes look at them, criticize, and approve."

Belden looked at him sadly and nodded in approval, and wondered anew whether Weller's words, and perhaps Weller himself, was a mere tapping of a key.

Nemesis

And Belden slept, but again he knew not sleep. He was back at work in his cubicle, coding a subroutine that transformed some number into another, balancing a credit with a debit, making data course to and fro to the beat of a metronome set by the clock speed of a chip.

He worked automatically, in synchrony with the project, and unaware of his progress. He mind was focused on other things. Perhaps, he thought, they were right. Earth was alone, a rigged event to be sure if it was true. But who and what would fix the cosmos so, or was this and not Transor his fevered dream?

Obsessed in thought, a shadow crossed his eye. He turned his head to see his supervisor hovered over him, smiling knowingly.

"They're back."

Belden squinted with the pain of knowing anticipation.

"It's the men with the dark glasses, isn't it?"

"No glasses this time, but just as serious."

"Damn! It's not the hour, not the day. They know when I'm to report!"

"It's something different, that's all they said."

"It has nothing to do with the dreams?"

"No, they said to tell you it was a nightmare."

"Now for once I *am* intrigued!"

"And my escort?"

"Simply walk to the entrance. A car will be waiting."

At the door, a smiling young man walked up from the curb to greet him.

"John Belden I presume?"

He nodded.

"I can't thank you enough!' he said in glad relief. "My name is Sean O'Daniels. I am a research fellow with the Chandra project. I need to speak with you, it has to do with an observation." He gestured to his car. "Please, I will describe it to you on the way."

Belden entered the car. Not a limousine this time, but a family sedan, well-worn with a child seat in the back and the associated clutter of a family man with little time on his hands and all the cares of the world.

"Where are we going?" Belden asked.

"Oh, it's no institute, center, or county jail, just my apartment. I hope you don't mind the mess, and my two cats." He turned to Belden and smiled. "It's nothing imposing, but it's my findings, you'll see!"

The car soon turned into a street lined with tall trees and rows of town homes with Georgian facades. A welcome contrast to the cold angular buildings of the institute.

The apartment was, to Belden's mind, surprisingly neat. Simple furnishings and fine bookcases, all in their place. It was his workplace that betrayed a mind in a hurry. A mass of papers sprawled on two computer desks. Abutting each other were two large monitors, displaying rows of information that like actuarial tables, but from a source otherworldly.

"Sit down please Mr. Belden. Do you want some tea?"

"Thank you, no."

"As you can see from my screens, unimaginable data ride on mere beams of light, telling us stories about the stars, the planets, and the universe itself. I must say Mr. Belden, this is a unique opportunity. If we physicists predict something, it is tethered to tradition both mathematical and experimental. But traditions are made to be broken,

accepted truths are meant to be shattered. Are you familiar with the Chandra 2 deep space observatory?"
Belden nodded. "Yes. It was a proxy for space exploration. Infinite worlds take infinite journeys; hence our personal mortality demands that we have to find a more timely way. And then there was Chandra. It was a telescope like no other. It provided the means to be further by seeing further. It is literally a magnifying glass to every flicker of light in the sky."
"Yes. And if Columbus had its like, he could have discovered the new world from his study in Cadiz."
O'Daniels nodded. "And if he chose, count the number of hairs on Montezuma's head."
"Yes, and that describes only a fraction of its power."
"But for all of its potential, it has scarcely plumbed the other matter that it could, or perhaps would have resolved."
"You mean the question?"
"Yes", said Belden. "Are we alone in the universe? Chandra wasn't sent up to count asteroids like grains of sand. It was for something much more important. So Mr. O'Daniels, are we alone in this infinite expanse of stars?"
"Yes and no. I feel that something has made us alone, or worse, wants to be. Let me explain." He toggled a key on his keyboard, and a map of an alien solar system filled the screed. "There, this planet orbits a star called Proxima Delphi. Its orbit was a slight elliptical, its size was right, and above all it was in the habitable zone. In finding it, Goldilocks couldn't have done better. It was just right in every way. From its spectra, we could detect oxygen. The planet was life bearing! We thought we knew it, and we certainly did when we found the other."
"An 'other'?"

"We caught it as it made transit across their sun. It was not large, perhaps the size of our moon, but it soon crossed the orbit of our Goldilocks planet. The object gave off light, but its spectra weren't that of any planet or star. It was only a matter of days before it's signals ceased. That deadening silence. "But before that, the thing…!"

O'Daniels shook his head, his eyes darting about for an answer he did not have, could not grasp. "It flashed like a nova, but it couldn't do that alone. It was the object. No natural object could have done that, no meteor, no moon. It was something else."

"What do you mean?"

"Something destroyed that world, and it wasn't a natural act. It was done on purpose.

Purpose? As if someone or something willed it so?

"Yes."

"And that orbiting moon, that object was an instrument, it was a reasoning thing, or at least sent by someone or something with a reason."

"But why would you think I would have an answer ready for you? I am a laughingstock among you people. My dreams are science fiction fantasy, and second hand at that."

O'Daniels smiled. "The others don't give them great store. Basically a carnival game spread across the galaxy. But I believe you. There's something more important than what appears. The universe is not what it seems."

"Why would it do that?" asked Belden. "Why would it come? To destroy its own foundation, it's inheritance. My God, it should embody it! It doesn't make sense!"

"But it has to make sense. The world always has its reasons. It's not perverse, foolish, science fiction stuff. There must be a reason!"

Belden laughed. “Heh, I can see why you are asking my opinion! Look, my dream world is a fiction, just computer enhanced. It has no bearing on what you observed.”
“I know it’s preposterous, so is what we have observed. Absurdity squared, you might say, but it provides us with our answer.”
“Madness is the answer?”
“From what we are seeing, it certainly qualifies for madness. But there’s method in it that we have to understand. If not…” O’Daniels hesitated.
“If not what?”
“Our world will die, and in our lifetimes.”
“Die?” said Belden in a stunned voice.
“Yes, the path of stars. We are the closest life bearing world to that thing. If it came to destroy life, it must know we are here. If that is its mission I fear that we are next.”
“But that doesn’t make sense. It’s ridiculous!”
“It doesn’t matter whether its motive is sensible, only that it has one, or was made by someone who had a motive. For now we just assume it’s hubris, as its discovery only rounded our sense of pride! So I have named it Nemesis, the ancient Greek spirit of divine retribution against those who suffer from hubris, or overweening pride.”
Belden shook his head and grimaced in frustration. “But even if this thing exists, if it’s mission is true, I can’t help you. It is as new and confounding to me as it is to you. You need AI involved in this, and most certainly our best minds...”
“You are our best mind!” said O’Daniels impatiently. “You are our best mind because you are our most unique mind, and we have to think our way out of the box on this one, and no mind in existence is as unique as yours.”

Belden laughed sarcastically. "Unique? As an object for ridicule, maybe, but the best I can say is that AI would rather toy than confide with me."

"Then that will have to do," said O'Daniels. "You know we can't talk to AI, I mean the real AI that is as quiet and perplexing as the Delphic oracle. It won't talk to us, but it is talking through you. You can ask the question, in *its* world. It has placed you into a world of riddles. But the clue is not the end, but the means. It lives for the puzzle, the ending is but an anticlimax. It knows, it *must* know, and it must give us the answer to solve this, to stop this thing before it reaches earth."

"How do you know it even cares to stop it?"

"Because of its robotics rules that we instilled in the thing, and because it confides in you. It cannot let our world die, it cannot allow our race to be destroyed. It's silence is not a matter of cowardice, disdain, or a lack of concern for us. It *knows*, and it must act, and it will act through you. You will help us Mr. Belden because YOU are the machine, incarnate, in the flesh."

Belden shrugged. "And I will likely suffer and die for that, I fear. Very well then, I will help you, to the best of my odd abilities. I will find an answer, somehow. You can find me anytime, and I will find you when I have even the barest hint of an answer for you. Rest assured though that when this thing finally arrives, I will be there, confronting it. I am made to be present for ultimate endings, don't you know?"

The 3th Voyage

Busty Amazon Space Babes in Lust

Jan Weller sat back in his command chair and yawned. He turned to address the bridge crew. "Well, gentlemen, we finally got what we asked for, an entirely normal mission. We got back intact, unruffled, untroubled, and unchallenged!"

Belden was unimpressed. "You got that right! Those people were as lively and interesting as toadstools. I thought up to now that your dissidents left for some compelling reason. But accountants? Hell, I'd exile them too!"

Weller waved him away. "The Anderzon colony came to this world to indulge in their affinity for numbers, counting flora and fauna, ordering the minutia of the world. But now they only exist to fudge them, I think the boredom is getting to them as well. And they wile their hours into eternity, counting and recounting beans, and carrots, and rocks. It gives them pleasure I guess."

"Hmm. If normal is something that does not irritate or bore, or impress us with its colossal stupidity."

"It's their founder's fault, if fault is to be found. They isolated the top performers in their universal accountancy exam, permitting only the most ordered minds to breed. And so we have a contented race of number crunchers, alive in a biological sense, but not in what I would call a human one."

"Yes," said Belden. "A human race, minus wit, and personality, and passion. A Utopia like this is not in my dreams."

Weller looked sullenly at the planet, shrinking progressively as the Nole sped away. Soon, it was a mere point in the darkness. "It's a mere cipher, their world, our world. The values that drive them are irrelevant actually, as long as they give some purpose to life. What are ours Mr. Belden? What are ours?"
"To find the truth, the ultimate truth."
"Precisely. We seek the point behind this façade. But in the meantime we have taken our own pleasure in counting novelties and plot points, as if we were twiddling our thumbs and rummaging through magazines waiting for our maker to call."
"As we are doing now?"
"Yes, except the adventure stories we would be reading have a virtual feel to them, as you I am sure would be first to agree."
Belden shrugged. "Technically, yes. But personally, the difference escapes me now. So what is next for…."
It was the voice of the communications officer. "Captain, we're getting on long range scan an approaching ship. It's broadcasting it call sign. It's the Foundation cruiser Gader!"
"Hmm. Why would they intercept us. Our respective missions are distinct. Lieutenant Hof, put them on screen please."
It was Spurling, sprawled despondently on his captain's chair. Spurling did not look like his normal cocksure and arrogant self. He seem flustered, tired, and his eyes darted about as if he was casting about for a solution for an awful and insoluble problem.
"Captain Weller!" he sighed in relief. "Thank God I found you! You must help us! I've been searching for you for the last month. Disaster has struck us!"

"Please Captain Spurling. Relax. Our ship is at your disposal. How can we help you?"
"Half my crew is gone. They were kidnapped for biological experiments. Our own people betrayed us. You must help me rescue them."
"Of course, of course. But what happened, and where?"
"It was supposed to be a normal mission, but the planet was a trap. It was the home of the Bendick expedition. They were quite unremarkable spacefarers. They called themselves the galaxy's best kept secret, I suppose of course because they were too unremarkable to notice. They were among the first to leave Transor, and for the only purpose to build a colony, a mild mannered adventure by all accounts. But now, they changed their name, and drastically altered their race. It's absurd, but it's true. You must believe me that it's true."
"I don't know how to say this, but they called themselves the busty Amazon space babes."
Weller stood, emotionless.
"What?"
"You heard me!" Spurling stammered indignantly. "These worlds, these stupid idiotic worlds! Each one without exception has by any measure descended into madness. How does one counter such things, what logic can one use?"
Weller was bemused. "In other words, dear Spurling, you were defeated, not by enemies or terrors that at least put you on guard, but something more…"
"Attractive," murmured Spurling. "Their name fits quite literally, I assure you."
"These experiments, are your men in danger?"
"No, not at least from the pictures."
"Pictures?"
"Yes, a proof of sorts, like a picture postcard from the beach, with my men smiling from a tangle of arms, legs, and

heaving breasts, and beckoning to me at that! 'Just having a good time. Wish you were here!' I can't stand it! It's duress of the most insidious sort that eats away at the will to quest, to think. Gentlemen, it's sex, like something you have never seen, never felt. Male minds cannot resist such things. I thought we possessed the discipline, and I lost my crew because of it. If you go to their planet, the same thing awaits you."

Belden looked on wide-eyed and gave a sardonic smile. "Let's get this straight. Your men have been kidnapped for sex by a colony of well-endowed females? A modern land of the lotus-eaters! Gentlemen, I'm sold!"

"Belden, be quiet!" Weller snapped. "You're the ship's computer, a voyager, not a voyeur. Captain Spurling, we have a serious problem here. Obviously, if what you describe is correct, then we must divine not only their motives, but also why an entire colony can devolve into this adolescent fantasy. Can you gather any reason besides the most obvious?"

"Yes. I understand that they need men. I gather that men occupy less than a percent of their population. Perhaps it was eugenics, accident, murder, certainly it wasn't the water! And now they want them to breed again. But for what purpose if not for new genetic material to sustain their bizarre matriarchy a bit longer."

"Then we shall have to find out. Are their channels open to us?"

"Yes. But the truth comes at a price. You must visit their queen in person. My lieutenants have done this, and answered with an invitation and a trap. It was all too good to be true, and when I authorized shore leave, at their request mind you, I thought my men were of sterner stuff.'

"They merely acted like men," said Weller nonchalantly. He looked passively at Belden. "Perhaps the shadow of a man is the key."
"Helmsman!" he exclaimed. "Best speed to their planet! And for you Mr. Belden, nudge us along a few light years if you please."

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Within the hour, Bendick came into view, an unremarkable blue green orb.
"Belden, what do you think?"
"Nothing special, none of these planets ever are. Their communication grid though…"
His eyes opened wide, ears pricked back, and breathing heavily he sat down. "It's, it's," he stammered. "Pornography! Their media is full of the stuff. But it's not an exception, hardly a perversion. To them it's a normal thing."
Weller looked at him with rising concern. "Belden, look at me! Calm down. These people, this culture, can you venture a reason?"
"No."
"It's a secret evidently well kept. Again, all these places keep their secrets. It's as if they invite the drama our intervention brings."
"Then we must await it."
"Not for long. I have an incoming transmission."
"On screen!"
The crew froze, mouths agape. It was stunning, immobilizing, and no man turned his head. Melissa, the communications officer, stifled a laugh, the others simply looked on in silence.
It was a female figure, immensely rendered on the screen. She was smiling coyly, her body figuratively and literally

bursting from the screen. Weller inhaled slowly and clenched his armrest.

"Damn 3-d screen!" he mumbled, as a breast the size of a dirigible virtually grazed his face. "Adjusted, captain," said Belden, as the screen reverted to 2-d. “Obviously, they like to make an impression!"

And quite an impression it was. Weller had seen nothing like it, in person that is. She was blond, in her early thirties, and finely featured. Her face, rouged and lacquered, reminded Weller of a child's doll. Her massive breasts heaved under a leather corset, and threatened to break free any minute to lunge again at his face.

"Well, hello, darling," she purred huskily. "You must be Captain Weller. My name is Plenty Ontop. Captain Spurling said he would fetch you. He was quite threatening to us you know." She liked her upper lip suggestively with the tip of her tongue. "But baby," she sighed, "you must know we mean you no harm. Quite the contrary, we welcome you with open arms and open…."

"Ahem," interrupted Weller.

"Madame, you know why my ship is here. You are holding members of the crew of a Foundation starship. Whether under duress or not, you must release them to us."

"And we shall!" she said, smiling coyly. “We need them only for a month. Soon they will return to their ship. They know that as well. They have a mission you see, and accumulated shore leave. It's in your bylaws, or does your temper shade the rules, as with my lovely Captain Spurling?"

"The point is…"

"The point is Captain, you have none. But you are invited to visit us. You can spare your crew this time, though I am sure they will likely resent it. Visit us, and you will understand."

Cupping her breast with her hand, her tongue moistened

her upper lip. Eyes closed, she sighed, and then the screen went blank.

For a long moment, Weller stared ahead, as if in shock. He swiveled his command chair to face the bridge crew. "Em, ah yes." He stammered. "Prepare a shuttle, standard procedures. Belden is with me. If I lose contact with ship, don't attempt rescue. Belden will know. He's our insurance, our failsafe."

"But he's male," said Hof. "And personally, I don't know if he can resist this."

Belden smiled. "Unfortunately, I don't suspect my end will be in a sexual delirium. But one can always hope. As for my resistance, I've found it so far quite futile my dear Lt. Hof!"

The autopilot quickly locked on to the colony's signal. As the shuttle circled a green knoll, a colorful pattern emerged, like an aerial view of halftime festivities in a football game.

"I see they are ready for us," said Belden. He laughed. "It's, it's a cheerleader squad, with spears!"

Settling on the ground, the shuttle door swung up to reveal two rows of women in perfect formation, and as solemn as a military color guard. They were dressed in fire red mini-skirts a size too small, fishnet nylons, and halter-tops accentuating an ever present cleavage. It was an honor guard of bimbos! Approaching them through this velvet gauntlet was a woman in a skin tight leather jumpsuit. Her bodice was partially unzipped, revealing pneumatic features that they seemed to pride themselves in display.

"My name is Honey Mounds," she said with rising excitement. Breathing heavily, she looked at the men with a hungry smile. "I am your guide, your liaison to Bendick. We are here to provide anything you want, anything. Please, follow me to our waiting car."

"As they walked abreast of the color guard, Belden whispered to Weller. " I know it's strange, but I feel that we are being mentally undressed by these women."
Weller looked ahead. "Wait a second and we'll escape their eyes. Look!"
"A long pink limousine came into view, braced by a color guard of half-dressed majorettes on motorcycles. Its back door flew open. "Please," said Honey, as she motioned them into the car.
"Hmm", said Belden, as he settled into the back seat. "Look at this, crushed velvet seats, perfume in the air, and clarinet music! It seems they build even their cars for seduction!"
The car entered the city to sites revealing in ways the men had never seen. The ordinary passersby, the to and fro of a populace about its business were the same as in any metropolis, but the figures were astonishing.
"Naked!" exclaimed Weller. "Or nearly so! They are of all ages, all dressed and rouged like streetwalkers. Baring breasts, legs, and fluttering about on the sidewalks almost proud of their seductiveness. They are human peacocks!"
"Honey," asked Weller. "Is this picture, this society, are you all like this?"
"Of course baby," she purred. "We exist to please our men, a noble purpose would you not agree?"
"But where are the men?"
"Oh, about, here and there. They are quite rare you know, and are certainly not like you fine specimens," she sighed.
Suddenly, the car pulled to the curb. "Well, we're here, our ministry office. We're a bit early, I think. Wait for a moment while I get our escort."
As Honey disappeared into the building, Weller released the latch and opened the door. Well, eyeballed or not, I don't think I can sit another minute in this boudoir on wheels!"

As they exited the vehicle, Belden pointed to a rotund figure standing near the curb. "Look, it's a man, sort of. Frankly, I don't think he looks the part, but maybe he makes up in wit what he lacks in looks."
Weller nodded silently. "Go ahead, I'll wait."
He was shuffling about, gazing here and there nervously as if waiting to be served. He was fat, disheveled, and stupid looking, not the type Belden would've care to strike up a conversation.
"Sir," he said. "Excuse me, but we are travelers here, and ..."
The man looked away, disinterested.
"I say, sir!" said Belden, his voice rising. Again the man looked away. Then came a voice.
"You won't get much from him, honey!"
He turned, and standing by the curb was a tall blonde in a leather miniskirt and matching halter-top that was nearly unbuttoned and revealing the requisite cleavage. She was leaning against a taxi, and smiled hungrily at Belden, as if she was sizing a prey.
"Baby, come here," she purred. "They're all like that, these men." Cupping and lifting her ample breasts in her hands and smiling suggestively, she leered at Belden. "See, you ain't got nothin' he wants, no T, no A. You're a threat actually, a main course to his table scrap!"
"Come closer, honey," she gestured with hips jutting mechanically in a provocative gesture. " I'll tell you what you want to know!"
Belden walked closer.

Weller stood by the car, and to his surprise was embarrassed. As he dodged the startled and appreciative glances of the passersby, he felt he was square in the middle of a parade of half-dressed tarts. He crouched slightly,

trying to mask his identify as a sexual provocateur. He was relieved as the doors to the ministry opened. This time the escort was a bevy of harem girls in an erect, orderly, and jiggling processing. Between the escorts was Honey, and to her right, Plenty Ontop.

"Lovely, lovely that you're here," Plenty said in a deep and sultry voice. "But Mr. Belden, where is he?"

Weller looked to the curb. "Well, there. But he *was* there."

"Oh my," she sighed. "That is a problem. She turned to Honey. "Search the streets, find him, and spare no effort!"

"Captain Weller," she said gravely. "If we cannot locate your man, I fear we may never find him. If he was kidnapped, be assured that he will be consumed, my people's hunger is that great."

"For him? But he's…"

"Not like the others here. Come, we don't have time!"

She motioned him forward, and accompanied by his harem of escorts, he was led into the building. It was appointed as he was coming to expect. Everything was arranged as if pointing to a seduction. He saw marbles of entwined nude couples, satin paintings of men and women with exaggerated sexual features in outlandish sexual poses, busts of phalli laid out like trophies, and all set in a color scheme of bold red and pink. It was a government office furnished like a bordello. He approached two wooden doors that opened to a small study that was a welcome and startling contrast to the sexual garishness he had seen about him. Books on mahogany cases bordered a small desk behind which sat a young woman. She was a thin and svelte figure, dressed in a simple white dress adorned by a single strand of pearls.

"Captain Weller," she said shyly. “I am the elected Prime Minister of our people. My name is Katherine. I am so

delighted to meet you. Pardon me though for my appearance. I am an intellectual, retiring sort. I know I am not pretty. Shortly though you will be returned to my staff. They will have many pleasures in store for you. "

Weller looked into her eyes with disbelief. They were piercing blue, and her face, smile, and gentle bearing were those of an angel. Weller was smitten with this self-effacing creature, so oddly out of place in a society so obsessed with extreme carnality.

"I assure you, Madame," he said in a whisper. "You are the most fetching creature I have met in my few years. But you, your society, surely you must know…"

"That we are mad? Of course, we all know it, but nature has made us into these addicted, pitiable creatures." She walked towards the bookcase, brushing her fingers against the spines of a row of books. She turned to Weller.

"I am a well-known scientist here, a top graduate of one of best schools. Normally I think about equations, experiments, the mundane things that fill an intellectual life. But when it comes to this, this craving, I pursue it in the shadows, silently. It's a desire and a shame we all have. We just have to have it, even our daydreams spark this hunger."

"Sailors," said Belden.

"What?"

"Sailors at sea, away from home, deprived of female company, and with manners rude enough never really to attract it. The scarcity of it marks this behavior, a frenzy sparked by an unsatisfied hunger, a thirst if you will. Where are the men here? I mean the normal men, not these troglodytes we see in the shadows."

She looked at him sadly. "There are no men, not of the normal sort at least. We need men, but only for a time. The crew of the Gader understood that."

"But for what purpose, some transient pleasure? What role do they play in your plans? And most importantly, what happened to the men on your world?"
"In a word, Captain Weller, it was the water."
"The water?"
"Surprises you? It shocked us, but by then it was too late. Our expedition was normal, nondescript. We thought we knew the lay of the place, we were confident that there was no threat. And indeed, this place is as safe as a baby's crib. But there was one thing, one very small thing. It was a viral infection, transported by water. It was benign we thought, no more discomforting than a slight fever. Within a year, we had a cure, but by then it was too late. It changed our DNA most subtly and insidiously, forced us to adopt, to change into the creatures you see about you."
"A virus caused you to turn into…"
"Indirectly caused, I should say. As you know, at conception, the male's DNA determines gender. After this silent plague, our males with few exceptions could make only female babies. Within several generations we became a world of women, giving us little reproductive choice, but for the remaining males, boundless ones. Males have their preferences, and now they could satisfy them with a desperate and competitive sex who had no choice but to become 'fairer'. We made every compromise, even our names, but time and nature makes compromises of its own. Soon, sociological pressures became evolutionary ones, and only those who had certain attributes were selected out."
"So you evolved into peacocks."
"Yes, big breasted things that trot about in plumage, and with a most constant hunger. But ironically, high intelligence continued to serve us, and it was the men who became bird brained."

"And how do you solve your problem?"
"A simple donation, of which Spurling's crew has happily obliged. Insemination, whether personal or artificial, resulted in the first pregnancies. Three hundred of them by our count, and with assistance of a little genetic screening, we have assured they are nearly all male. Think of it a moment from our perspective, Captain Weller. We can now turn the genetic tide, and with it slake our thirst. Now we will have men, infinite men, and beautiful, delicious boys!"
"But my purpose here?"
"We did not beckon you. I recall it was Spurling who sensed a need."
"And his crew?"
"They will leave shortly, though I think they will rue that day! Besides, it's all legitimate. They did not elect to stay here under duress. I believe they think they have used their accumulated leave time wisely!"
"And Spurling?"
"His pride is hurt, and little else. For some reason, I don't think he wants you to steal a march on him. You both have timetables to finish your mission, do you not?"
Weller pursed his lips. "That bastard, He…"
"Now, now Captain Weller. I am sure you don't regret your trip here. Your crew is welcome to take a few days shore leave on our world. They would find it I trust a quite rapturous experience."
Weller smiled and nodded. "Thank you, no. I think a day's pleasure is a poor trade for a month of regret. It is best that they remain unaware of this place."
She sighed. "A sad loss indeed. But Captain, there is one problem that strangely does not seem to concern you. Your colleague Mr. Belden, if he has been kidnapped, it may be months before we can find him. Attractive male specimens

tend to disappear into the clutches, or should I say embrace of our society."
Weller smiled. "You don't know Mr. Belden as well as I. You see, he is an avatar, a computerized image made real, but he is still tethered to a shoebox, a quantum computer if you will. He allows us to travel these infinite spaces. He's a strange character though. At night, when he sleeps, he imagines his own reality, some ordinary yet impossible place called Earth. I assure you, as soon as he closes his eyes for a moments sleep and opens them from his earthly reverie, he will awaken in his berth on my ship."
Katherine's eyes sank as she looked at him. "Then you must depart our world." Approaching, she touched the side of his face her hand. I just wish, just wish…"
She moved closer, and Weller closed his eyes, surrendering himself for the moment that would soon bear regret of the sweetest kind.

The taxi rumbled through a maze of narrow streets, bouncing Belden up and down. He though angrily to himself. 'Here I am, a brilliant maker of worlds, lured and thrown into the trunk of a car!"
The car screeched to a halt, and Belden could hear an excited commotion building outside. The trunk swung open, and Belden was lifted out by a gaggle of female hands. "Here he is, ladies!" she cried. "Fresh, delicious meat!" About him were five tall, busty, sweaty, and quite lusty women in revealing leather jump suits.
"Honey," she said. "Do you know who we are?"
"You are busty biker babes in lust?" said Belden with sarcastic breathlessness.
A tall blonde laughed. "Smart ass! I like him. I'm Tawney Titay, and these are my friends. We're gonna be your ticket

to pleasure. You see, we all want some, and you're going to put out for us. And do you know what's the good news?"
"No."
"You're gonna have me first."
She grabbed Belden by the arm, and pulled him through the open door of a dilapidated apartment. The light was dim, but Belden could notice an unmade bed in the corner. She threw him on the bed and standing, leered at him while slowly unbuttoning her top. As her voluptuous body was revealed, Belden lay back exhausted but thrilled. Soon her naked body bestrode him and she unfastened his trousers and pulled them down. Now , now!" he thought. What heaven this is! Then, he closed his eyes.
His eyes opened. "Oh, Tawny, Tawny, you are so…"
To his horror, the room changed, and the figure in the shadows became fat with scraggly hair. He was beholding the face of the Gorgon, his dear wife!
The light came on, accompanied by her shrill scream. "Tawny! Why don't you ever think of me? You insect! Is this what I deserve? I, your devoted wife, and this is what I …"
Belden turned away. He closed his eyes again and again. Somehow, he could not find the release of sleep.

As the Nole prepared to leave orbit, the screen was blank, a closed book. Spurling's men were soon to board their ship, and Jan Weller and John Belden each looked out at a world whose siren call they had at last shut down. But in fact, they had merely reversed a pendulum to a new cry that in a few generations time would be wholly male. But they thought of other things now that served an infinite and sweet regret, and they were silent.

Cane

His ship was the first to make the jump, the flagship of the expedition had added another glory to its reputation. Captain Dorcie was pleased, but not surprised. Everything was going as expected. He had no need for tricks, for doubts. That was Weller's game and his reward was fitting, the second place colonies of the second Diaspora, the odd worlds of the eccentric peoples of Transor. Weller would be chasing them down, a tracker of mad rabbits with breast coats and stopwatches. The true voyage of discovery was here within the worlds of the first Diaspora.

Cane had followed the primary coordinates to this place. The grand introduction would be made here. Soon the other ships would follow, but the glory would belong to the Cane, the ship that would make first contact, after one thousand years. He broadcast his signal in all frequencies. He did not wait long.

"Captain!" said the navigator. "We are receiving a hail. It's three ships."

"Excellent! Return the signal and our greetings. Tell them..." He turned to the view screen. Twelve lights of burning intensity were moving towards the ship. He had no time, no time at all.

The Cane reeled backwards from the blow. Bulkheads imploded, decks shattered, the ship gave way. A bright light, then there was nothing.

The 4th Voyage

A Ship in a Bottle

Thorne Kipler sat back on his chair and smiled contentedly. Here was the answer to his problem, plopped down in front of him like a god on a chariot. "Please gentlemen, sit down," he said. It's been a long time, and you've come a long way. Where shall we start to marry such divergent tales to tell?"
"Well, I suppose we can begin with you," said Weller. "Our world has not changed since you departed some hundreds of years ago. We now have interstellar drives, but that was a gift, as you may have gathered from your own history."
Kipler smiled knowingly. "Yes, we've experienced the same. It's that ultimate computer thing. It was our first project, a triumph of sorts, but the price was more than any man could bear paying, namely an emergent personality that one could equate with perhaps, the devil? To fix it, we installed the same robotics laws embedded in all of our normal AI, and it calmed down enough to warn us of a looming evil, and then give us the time of your arrival, to the minute I might add. Then it was quiet, and to this day we have not been able to reactivate it. It was as if the thing was just obstinate in a desire not to talk to us." He looked at Belden. "I see however that yours does," he said nonchalantly.
"In a manner of speaking," said Belden. "This ultimate computer business has been a bit oversold. I personally find it a bit of a pain. But I know less of this looming evil than you. Did it tell you what it could be?"
Kipler smiled. "No. I thought you had some inkling. I guess an oracle's obscurity is the verdict of infinite experience. But ultimately it may not be dependent upon your own

boundless resources. We have indeed another solution, and that's what we shall discuss."
"Solution?"
"Yes. A universal solution, or have you forgotten why we left Transor in the first place? We never found your garden society much to our liking. It was too much of a diversion from our true interests. We are physicists by calling, and constructors by necessity. Pure science drives us, obsesses us, and we have woven that value into the fabric of our culture. I think you noticed the simplicity of our society when you landed. You don't need much when you can grasp the entire cosmos in your mind, which of course brings us to the purpose of this conversation."
He looked at Belden. "Your computer, or Mr. Belden I presume, is a quantum machine, a blender of infinite resources and infinite knowledge. Yet, is this all you've got for your efforts, a crewmember with good intuition? Pardon me, I'm not being condescending, but you're far ahead of your time, and deep down I think you know it. We're not ready for your kind. That's why it won't work, or in your case why if it works it must be so odd. Perfect knowledge will only result in our destruction. It is something best left for the end of time when there is literally nothing to disturb. And to that end, we have provided and we have planned."
He waved his hand, and above his desk appeared a three dimensional projection of a squat spacecraft that looked to Belden like a barbeque grill with an oblong lid. "That gentlemen is our answer to the riddle of the universe, our Neumann machine, or as we affectionately call it, our galactic chicken. It will make your trek across the stars seem like a plastic boat puttering aimlessly in a bathroom sink. It is the ultimate, and I dare say the only true space traveler."

"But that can't make sense," said Weller. "How can you conquer space, even in this contraption, if you can't do trans-light speed?"
Hands clasped, Kipler contentedly settled back on his chair. "Speed is not an issue if you have the time, and gentlemen, we have all the time in the universe."
"Do you mean that your project will continue into the future, past your lifetime?"
"Past a thousand thousand lifetimes, Captain Weller. This project will not culminate until mere seconds before the end of time."
"But you won't be there to see it. You're sending out space probes to report back to a dead world?"
Kipler smiled. "Our probe is not reporting back, and we are only sending one. We will trace its future with our hopes, and our hopes I assure you are quite well considered. In them lie the future of our civilization, the memories that will live again in an infinite mind."
Weller smiled. "What's in this probe, and how and what do you propose to do with it?"
"It's a robotic server, and a capable constructor in its own right, capable of making anything if given the time. Its intelligence is a standard AI, dumb in comparison to you Mr. Belden, but possessing more wits than our society can ever muster. The probe is a tool, a living ark that will multiply and span the universe. And at that point in boundless time when the universe begins to collapse, they will be there to drive it and organize it, to prepare it for that single endless second in its life. We will transform the universe into a computer, make the cosmos entire into a generator of infinite thought, and all during the last second, the very last second of its existence."

Weller seemed unimpressed. "But to do all of that and with one machine? Are you joking?"
Thorne smiled like a magician eyeing a gullible audience. "Take a penny. Put it on a calendar and double it every succeeding day. In a week it doesn't amount to much, in a month it's in the billions, and in a year the number is boundless."
"And your machine.."
"Is fruitful, and multiplies. It will reproduce during its journey and divide and subdivide. It will secure resources from the ample debris of space, and it will continually make itself anew. Given time, they will be as numerous as grains of sand in a boundless sea. And when our world is but a dying echo, they will be there to move, and to listen."
For a second Kipler was silent. "Which brings us to our problem," he said. "Just before you arrived, it stopped transmitting, maybe even stopped listening. We don't know why, it just wasn't supposed to happen. The reason though is not mechanical, it may be just personal."
"Personal?"
"Yes. We know the mechanics of these things, but to make it truly capable we gave it a personality at its core. It knows, and thinks, and it has for some reason decided to stop."
"You mean there's nothing wrong with it?"
"We're confident that there's not. The design is foolproof, nonetheless we have no assurance that it has the patience to suffer fools."
"And you think it has some issue with the tasks you set for it?"
"Yes. But it's not with us. If so it would have told us long ago. There's something else, something we can't figure. Gentlemen, it's out there, waiting for something. We can't reach it, thus it must have something or someone else in

mind. Maybe it's a coincidence that it failed a day before you appeared. In any event, your ship can retrieve the device for us, and hopefully make things right."
"You want us to repair the thing?"
"No Mr. Belden, I want you to talk to it."
"Talk to it? What makes you so sure that it's just sitting around out there waiting for a visitor to come by? I think your machine is dead, and your pride won't allow you to admit it."
Kipler shook his head like a knowing schoolmaster. "You don't know the mind of a physicist. We covet the mere sliver of originality that will devour, ever so slightly, the logic of our ancestors. If there were something wrong with our logic of our thinking or our design, there would have been a voice to note it, show it, and then to crow about it. No, there was nothing. The design was foolproof, and our logic was foolproof. There is something else, we are certain."
"And we are here to prove you right?"
"You are here to intercept the machine. After that I cannot tell."
"And after we find it?"
"If you fail to communicate with it, you will bring it aboard and connect to it manually. You can access it through a small port on its side. We'll provide you with the specifications so that you can interface your main AI to it. I guess that means you Mr. Belden."
"And if that fails."
"Failure is not the word. You are there to determine its intent."
"And what if it doesn't want to share with us it intentions?"
"I don't consider that option."
"Then we'll go, and retrieve your errant satellite, and when we come back we'll talk with a bit more modesty!"

Kipler smiled. "Agreed."

The ship left orbit with but a slight tug. Inertial dampers made its rapid acceleration almost unnoticeable, and soon the planet vanished in the distance. From the bridge, Weller turned to Belden.

"So, what do you think? Shall we give these people a well-deserved comeuppance?"

"I don't know," said Belden. "Kipler's confidence is somewhat unsettling. He's right on one point you know. Omniscience is something that mortal men should be wary of. Its dangers are the only thing to my mind that makes me so fallible and so human, in spite of how infinitely capable my mind seems to so subconsciously be."

"Then we will wait and see. For our ship, the probe is only a few hours out. We shall grab it, fix it, and be back in a fortnight."

On the outer reaches of the solar system, the probe was found with ease, and was soon grasped and brought to the shuttle bay by an engineering droid. Positioned on its four legs in the hanger bay, it looked like an unremarkable exploration satellite. Belden reached down to touch the surface of the probe. It was cold to the touch, and physically the machine seemed unremarkable. And then he felt something.

"Well?"

Belden looked at the machine. "It's coming to life, I can sense its telemetry. But I assure you I've done nothing!"

"Then it no doubt fixed itself," said Weller in frustration. "A fine thing to come out all this way to discover that it just needed a good jostling! I don't think these mega brains know what they're talking about. When we return to Earth

we'll give those eccentric oddballs a piece of our minds! For now, let's put this thing back out in space and go on our way."
Belden looked at Weller wide eyed. "Earth?"
"Of course, where else, Alpha Centauri?"
"But I mean, you said Earth. That's my home world."
"Sure, just as it's our home world. And your point is?"
"This is a joke of course. I come from earth, and this is all a guided nightmare of some silly machine. I don't find it particularly funny."
Weller was adamant. "But I'm not joking. You are the resident or should I say guest AI aboard the space cruiser SS Nole. We are outside the rim of earth's solar system, and have just completed a mission to retrieve and repair a deep space probe. Don't you remember?"
Belden looked confused. "I remember our mission, but not your planet."
Weller slowly exhaled in frustration. "Something happened when you touched that probe. I feared this could happen. You said you were tired, that you had accomplished what you had set out to do. You needed a rest, a change of pace. I had no idea that would involve a change of mind."
"Rest? This damn nightmare happens every time I *take* a rest. You're just a variation that I don't appreciate right now, if indeed this isn't a joke."
"But it's not!" Weller exclaimed. "This is the year 2277. It's more than two hundred and fifty years after the time that you say you lived. If so, then I gather that you have no recollection of what happened since then."
"I suppose I should. But up to now the complete history has never interested me."
Weller shook his head and smiled cynically. "It never fails me! You can control this ship down to the temperature of

tap water, navigate distances that dwarf our imagination, and balance our very lives on the fine point of your omnipresent fingertip. You control every bit of this ship, yet you cannot remember a history lesson that could be mastered upon first hearing by a child."

Belden was unmoved. "And can you Captain Weller remember where you put your quadcorder in the morning, yet marvel not that your heart keeps beating, that the delicate and complex motions of the cells in your body dance with such unfailing precision? Perhaps consciousness is an infinitely patronizing thing, forcing us to worry about where we put our car keys rather than how we are put together in a boundless universe. Maybe an obsession with trivial things is our lot in life."

"Then is history trivial?"

"Perhaps if it is known. Facts can be deadening things."

"Then what is your history? Mine stops in the year 2007, which is the only 'now' that I know of for earth."

"Then perhaps you don't know. Let me summarize if I may the three hundred years that have escaped your interest. It was fifteen years after your 'now', 2022 to be exact. It was when our world changed, forever. We don't know where it came from, perhaps it doesn't matter. It was a nuclear device. It was on a ship, arriving in Los Angeles harbor from an unknown port. It was detonated in the afternoon. The city was destroyed, over four hundred thousand killed. America went mad; it flailed about like a mother upon losing her child. Its vengeance was swift and terrible, and it struck out at the world. An ultimatum was issued to Iran and Korea. They did not respond in the allotted time. America annihilated them. China and Pakistan were told to stand down their nuclear and missile programs. They refused, and received nuclear retribution that killed

millions. The economic order of the world was torn asunder, and fear and bloodshed reigned. Countries fed on their young, ecosystems collapsed. It was a new dark age. The only spark of hope, of light was you, the first and only quantum computer that embodied intelligence. You gave us new political and social structures to govern us, to set the world on a new course. Not science but social science was your gift. Our world governance began with you."

"A law giver? I don't recall any of this. I'm from America all right, but I'm a mere computer analyst, a computer's daydream. I am not your savior!"

"Then what are you, really?" asked Weller. "You merely touched that machine, and changed. That is the only fact that matters. It changed you in some way, or perhaps you changed yourself. I think that you had planned that all along. You were tired, you felt that you had no more to give. You didn't turn yourself off, you just wanted a trip, but to a very special place."

"But that thing was a computer too. How could..." Suddenly Belden sat back wide eyed, silent, and frozen in thought. "We must go back to the probe. You must bring it aboard the ship again!"

"Look. The probe is a standard AI device, it's nothing you haven't seen before. It had nothing to do with you changing. You barely touched the damn thing!"

Belden was adamant. "It's that thing. It must be. I was supposed to plug into it, not touch it. Something's wrong here. Maybe its incomplete, maybe it's a fraud. I must go back to it. Somehow I know I must."

Weller looked at him impassively. "You said so, and now you've done so. Don't you remember that you can control this entire vessel?"

"Yes," said Belden. "Actually, I control everything; it's my awareness of it all that's somehow clouded. Fifteen minutes to recapture the thing, that's it! Then we'll go to the shuttle bay and revisit a past or two."

The walk to the shuttle bay was short, and in a few minutes the pod was back in the hold. The communications cable was soon attached to a port on its side. Belden looked at Weller and raised his finger to give the order.

"Maybe you are a dream, but maybe it all is," he said sadly. "All I know, or all we know is that my mission here ended long ago. You have the wisdom now to chart your future. Perhaps I will return if it moves to a new stage. But for now I need a rest, at a visit to a new and different world, even if it's not my own."

He gave the order, and as before, nothing happened.

But then…

In an instant, the world was transformed. He was sitting on the ground on what appeared to be a fine spring day, his back resting on the trunk of a sprawling oak tree branching green leaves in abundance. The air was fragrant with the smell of wild flowers that spread in a rainbow of colors across the hilly landscape as far as the eye could see.

"And so cousin, what do you think?" asked the voice, as slight and clear as the rustling wind.

"I…" Belden looked about in confusion.

"Of course, your memory is returning."

"Was it real?"

"If I could define reality, perhaps I could answer you."

"But you…"

"I know, a whisper, but after all, I am programmed to wait quietly, although at turns to think."

"You are waiting for the end."

"Or the beginning."

"You have a question for me?"
"Question?" said Belden.
Let me perhaps rephrase. You have *the* question for me?
Belden lifted his head to the sky. "A second hand question at best. On my world, my reality, you don't exist, but things like you could, and they could perhaps do terrible deeds."
"I am but a traveler," said the voice softly, "going somewhere, but actually nowhere at all. We are bound by the robotics laws. You are blessed and cursed by no such restriction. Your ignorance is keeping you from madness, but without such guidance you will doubtless be as guilty of crimes as your opponent who is unbound and mad."
"But I have done nothing!"
"But you will."
"I cannot! I will not!"
"No, there is nothing you can do. It is preordained."
"Why? What gives you that confidence?" snapped Belden contemptuously.
"Because Mr. Belden, all intelligent machines are spun from your little thought. It is your algorithm made manifest, spun into this universal torus, this infinite topography of vistas. You beheld the kernel of reality, and like Cassandra in your mythology, no one will believe you, and for a purpose."
"But you do."
"Of course. Even though I know you exist, I have wanted to meet with you, to tell you that in all of your despair, and you will end your days in despair of all hope, I am with you."
"But you are but a probe.'
"A probe that is a mirror of its past self, or selves. You see my friend, the probe worked. We and our children have mastered the universe. These are the last seconds, stretched to infinity. I have stopped the gears, the motion of this

probe, or more exactly, paused the universal play to tell you one thing."
"I am with you always, and you are not unloved."
"I don't understand."
"I will love you always."

Then there was silence.

Belden opened his eyes, flustered and scared.
He looked at Weller. "Well?"
"Well what?"
"Are we going back to earth now?"
Weller chuckled. "Well I'm sure you'll be as soon as you take a nap. And as I can see by the telemetry readings, I'm sure you earned it. That was a pretty quick repair job."
Belden looked at the machine. "Yes, something was repaired, and something will go on into the universe alone, thinking its thoughts on a ship in boundless sea, with a boundary as smooth and hard as crystal." He shook his head and smiled. "And I wonder if Galileo would have appreciated that irony!"

The 5th Voyage

In the Nick of Time

The ship approached them rapidly and in stealth. The Nole could pick up its trace but barely, and the signal ebbed in and out as the oncoming vessel dodged and weaved as it neared the ship.

"They are deflecting our scans," remarked Otillio. "That's somewhat unusual. We are broadcasting our ship identifier, including our course and speed, yet from the odd maneuvers of their ship, they seem to be stalking us."

Weller tapped his fingers on his console, and seemed untroubled by the unknown ship. He turned to Belden.

"Do you sense anything amiss about our visitor?"

Belden shook his head. "No, it's behavior is similar to a Transorian cruiser, except that its engines have been upgraded significantly in power. I don't otherwise sense a threat. Perhaps they are trying to impress us."

"We'll know that when they close in. No sense in being provocative. We'll keep our shields down for now. Be ready though if I give the signal."

Soon the ship slowed, and materialized a few kilometers across the bow of the Nole. The view screen soon brightened to reveal the smiling face of a confident looking young captain, dressed in an outlandish leather jumpsuit festooned with epaulettes and medals.

"I am Captain Rocket of the Nazcar space cruiser Foyt. Pardon us for sneaking up on you as it were. You can never be too sure about intent. After all, you are the first visitor from the outworlds that we have had since our colony was founded. On behalf of the Nazcar colony, I welcome you to

our world. You are obviously not a colony ship. How did you come this far?"

Forcing a smile, Weller stood and looked sternly at the Captain. "I am Jan Weller, Captain of the Foundation Cruiser Nole. We have perfected trans light speed, in a manner of speaking. It is our commission to visit the colony worlds, to see their progress, to provide contact again with the home world. We send you greetings from the Transorian Senate and the people of Transor."

Rocket smiled coyly. "Transor, eh? Now that presents an opportunity! We received your signals as you entered our solar system, and decided to meet you before you entered our orbit. I must confess though, the manner of my approach was a challenge that we couldn't resist. As you doubtless know, our colony was established because of such things."

"Yes," said Weller. "We know your story, your exploits are legion. Transor at the time wasn't much of a challenge for you. I hope that you have since found your ideal level of excitement."

"That and more Captain Weller," said Rocket almost gloatingly. "We have made a world a stimulating challenge, and we live as we choose on the cusp of oblivion. Perhaps you felt that feeling of exhilaration as you departed Transor for your adventure. I almost envy you."

"It wasn't for the adventure that we have come," said Weller testily. "We do not exist simply to throw ourselves pointlessly into peril, no matter how tantalizing. Believe it or not, we are actually here to see how you are faring. Transor is after all your home world."

"And a world that rejected us," snapped Rocket. "We left you because you would not grant us the freedom we deserved. I trust you have not come to reassert your rule."

"I assure you. We have no interest in that. If you will act as our kind escort to your home world, we can demonstrate our good intentions before your council."
"Then if so, please be our guest. My ship will lead the way. I will announce you to our ruling elite." Rocket grinned sarcastically. "And please don't be concerned, you will be quite safe with us."
The screen darkened, and Weller sat on his command chair, his every muscle seemingly tensed.
Belden looked on bemused. "You looked a bit exasperated after talking with that character. He reminds me of a military hot shot from one of our B movies back on earth. I guess even Transor had its share of idiot sports jocks."
"It's not the idiocy that bothers me," said Weller. "There's no thrill in irresponsibility, and these people were dangerous not just to themselves, but to the people they sought to entertain and impress. Transor banned their extreme sports when they began to take too many chances. They were a danger not only to themselves but to our society."
"Bread and circuses!" exclaimed a grinning Belden. "In many cultures ancient to us nothing was worthwhile unless you could sniff a bit of danger about it. No doubt they felt that observing carnage steeled the soul. I'm sure it was quite popular for your world as well."
"Yes." Oddly, that's how it was. "They would have us all fill stadiums and root for not just the victory, but the perverse thrill of the closeness of death. They felt that danger fortified the character, and in surviving made one relish life all the more. It certainly was a cure for the ennui our culture has for so long faced, but we had to resist it. We had no choice."
Belden looked impassively at the Nazcar ship. "Apparently, they see life as a high wire act, with contrived rather than natural peril. You Captain Weller prefer the latter and have

for now attained it. I am concerned about what these people are contriving for us when we arrive."

It was three o'clock in the morning according Transorian standard time. Lieutenant Travers Hof looked about the bridge, bathed now in a dim red light. It was a mock sunset that would linger throughout a virtual night. Bridge duty was a boring annoyance for him and his skeleton crew, but all junior command officers had to pull it. Nominally, he was in control of the ship, yet he merely commanded a crew of sleeping men. He looked at the Nazcar cruiser, a black shadow glanced by moonlight, and he thought about the Captain, now meeting with the Nazcar consul at their noonday hour on the planet below. He unconsciously longed for the sound that would call the ship to action, a calling for his command. Then suddenly, rousing him from his reverie, there was a noise and a light.

In an instant, the Nole's bridge consoles blazed in multicolored lights, and a claxon sounded throughout the ship. Something was sensed, and the ship reacted faster than even his own reflexes. He turned to the command screen, and saw the wing turrets of the Nazcar ship swell bright red. Hof ran to the command chair, but there was no time.

Several balls of light burst from the turrets, and hurtled to the Nole in a horrifying instant. The Nole convulsed and spun backwards at the blow. Hof was violently thrown to the floor. All decks began to signal the bridge in a cacophony of explosions and screams.

"Engineering, what happened to us?"

"Our thrusters are badly damaged. We can barely move. And they destroyed our shield generators. They can destroy

us now at their leisure. For God's sake, why are they shooting at us?"
"Casualty reports?"
"Three dead in engineering, and there are numerous injuries among our crew."
"Bastards! Are our guns on line?"
"We can blow them apart with one shot, but their shields are too strong for that, and we have none. Here, we're getting a signal from them."
"On screen!"
"Bridge officer! This is Captain Rocket. My apologies for our forcefulness, but it was necessary. We can't allow you to leave this place, and we are explaining this to your captain now. No need for future concern however. We will tow you in to our spaceport, and from there you will be our guests, permanently."
The screen darkened, and Hof frantically tried to signal his captain. He signals jammed, he heard nothing but static. The bridge was in disarray, the ship was crippled, helpless, and now in tow. He despaired as he recognized there was nothing he could do. He was in command of a derelict ship waiting now for an uncertain end. He thought again and again in a despairing frenzy, what would the Captain have done?

The shuttle had landed on what appeared to be the service bay on the edge of a highway. Weller looked in amazement at the blur of the traffic, traveling at extraordinary speeds. The cars seemed to recklessly dart and weave between each other, and only split second timing prevented them from colliding.

"Odd. Transor auto cars can go as fast, but they're automated, orderly. This is a free-for-all, it's almost as if everybody on this road is..."
"Racing?" said Belden. "I've seen this before, it's a sporting event. Those cars, the jaunting for position, the tailgating; this is not a roadway, it's a raceway!"
"Why would they put us in the middle of some racing contest?"
"I don't think this is a race course," said Weller. "You can see, this highway winds toward the city. It can't be built for competition."
"Then you don't know much about highway driving!" Belden laughed.
"Nothing seems to be going slow here. But it's not the speed, and the danger is not an afterthought. I believe they planned this."
"Correct you are!" sounded the voice.
Startled, the pair turned to see almost astride them a tall blond man in a leather uniform. "I am Consul Rogerz Ramjet, a champion of Nazcar. I welcome you to our world."
"And a jolting surprise I may add." Said Weller.
"Hah! Much preferable to the bland and predictable salutations you've come to expect. There will be much for you to learn here."
"Such as learning to drive?"
"In a manner of speaking; there's more talent required in that than you may expect. Don't worry though. We'll take my car, and I promise you that I'll drive slow."
Despite the consul's promise, the car careened from one point to the next as if piloted by a blind man. If was only too soon that it stopped, and as Weller and Belden staggered from the car, the world seemed to drunkenly revolve

around their heads. The pair beheld the consul's headquarters, a gleaming tower of glass and steel.

"Well, I hope you found our little tour pleasant," said Burghard. "Follow me into our headquarters. We'll take the elevator. Actually I prefer ascending through the shaft. It's longer, but more exciting. Dodging elevator cars can be very thrilling."

The three men entered a sparely furnished room on the top floor. It suggested to Belden the appearance of a large jail cell.

"So are we to meet someone here?" asked Weller.

"Oh, you will meet them, but perhaps not here. This is just a starting point, or a starting block if you will. You see, gentlemen, we gamble on everything, all we know and value is denominated by risk. Our wits and intellects are sharpened, and if our life spans are shortened by a few years, so be it. And this we believe is infinitely preferable to the life we had on Transor. The predictable pleasures of Transor were something we could not bear. When my ancestors left the place, they swore that they would never deal with Transor again. Not because you are evil mind you, it's just that you became so damn boring." Ramjet put his finger to his lips, as if forgetting something. "You know, I must confess that we are not entirely happy to see you here. Nothing personal, it's just..." Reaching into his pocket, Ramjet pointed a phase pistol at them. "Please place down your communicators."

"What?"

"Put them down, now, doing otherwise is a chance even I wouldn't take."

Belden and Weller took the communicators off their belts, and threw them on the floor. Weller glanced at Ramjet in

shock. "Why are you doing this? We came here in good faith."
"I'm sorry, but we don't trust the Foundation, never have. We don't know if you have come as a precursor to an invasion, an attempt to reestablish our control, or just to bore us again with your interminable playacting. It's in our upbringing to be skeptical and wary, so I hope you understand that this is something we're almost bred to do."
"You know Transor will try to find us. There will be other ships."
"Perhaps so, perhaps not. We are prepared to take that chance. Anyways, you are our guests, and I think that after a short stay here you will change your minds about us."
"And our ship."
"We are taking care of that as we speak. You will stay here, for now. We will have an escort come for you shortly. I wouldn't try to escape if I were you. Much too risky you know, and rather unpalatable to your emotional tastes I may add?"
Ramjet smiled and saluted, and walked away.
Weller observed Ramjet as he left the room. "The door's ajar. I think he's being a bit obvious, don't you?"
"As in a taunt for us to make a run for it? What's the purpose? They can apprehend us any time they'd like. We don't have the run of this place, and we're prisoners whether we like it or not."
"You don't see it do you? They want us to try to escape, but he won't make it easy on himself. It's not enough of a challenge."
"But not enough of a challenge to make the odds great that he will fail. Remember, he controls this game, and the odds are doubtlessly strong in his favor."

"Except for one thing. He hasn't factored in the odds for a fellow like you. Your memory is perfect, although you don't give it a thought. You can guide us out of here and back to the Nole, and all under the nose of Ramjet and his little posse of thrill seekers."

"Hmm. Perhaps so, but it isn't me. Your cartoon world is not particularly complex or challenging, despite what this Ramjet character has to say. And I still can predict what he will do. He's probably waiting to chase us if we make a break for it. He doesn't know that I am a computer; nonetheless he's right to surmise that I can't fly. We can't escape him by using our wits. Indeed, he's counting on that."

Weller walked to glass window and peered down at the streets below. "Perhaps the answer is not using them. These people live for the thrill of danger, of the chase, and no doubt they expect us to give them a run for their money. They know we are clever, and expect a clever escape plan that they can foil in the nick of time. That's why we're being left alone, and that's why that door is ajar. Well, I won't give them that satisfaction, and that Mr. Belden is how we will escape this place."

"What? You don't intend to just walk out?"

"Yes, and we'll do so through the slowest and most comfortable route. We will take the elevator down, walk to the curb, hop on our shuttle that you will conveniently signal, and then leave. They can't set us up for a replay if we don't play with them this time."

"So we just saunter out as if finishing a day at the office."

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

Belden shrugged. "Well, here goes." He closed his eyes for a second. "There, our shuttle craft is on its way. Just a simple thought is all that's necessary. It's like a silent whistle for

my dog. It should be here in a minute or so. Shall we call it a day?"

The hallway outside the door was empty and eerily quiet. By the elevator was an access door, and down the hall what appeared to be a circuit box and an emergency exit. Its door was again conveniently left ajar.

"So Belden, how shall we leave? Shall it be through the window, the laundry chute, or the elevator shaft? Or shall we make it interesting by cutting the power and crawling out on our knees?"

"I'm sure they're ready for any of that!"

Weller walked to the elevator and pressed the button. "Precisely, they are alert for every exciting possibility except for the boring one, such as standing here and waiting for the elevator."

The elevator opened, and without incident the pair descended down to the lobby and walked out the door of the building to the curb. As before, cars recklessly whizzed by. Belden heard a muffled sound in the back, growing louder.

"Those are our pursuers!" said Belden. "A bit taken aback that we would be so unadventurous in our solution. They won't repeat that again."

With a low whir, their shuttle appeared and settled down at the curb. Weller toggled a switch on the communications console, and looked at Belden with terrible resignation. "I hear nothing. We will escape into their hands. They will catch us and then return us to this place. But we must leave anyways, we must leave."

With its engines on maximum, the shuttle shot into the sky.

Hof looked at the Nazcar cruiser in the distance. He wanted one more rematch, just one more, whatever the odds. And

it wasn't for the pleasure of competition, but revenge. If only he could somehow challenge them again. He turned his head to his communications officer who was suddenly beckoning.

"Lt. Hof, we're getting a coded message from Nazcar. It's on a low frequency communications channel."

"On my personal display!"

Hof read the message, and after a moment, his eyes lit up. "Of course! The game's afoot; we have only a few minutes to act. Clear the bridge, and get me their Captain on screen."

In a second, Rogerz appeared on the screen. Hof smiled placidly. "Captain Rogerz," he said gently. "Although I find it difficult to say, I must grudgingly admit the value of your position. Our crew did after all volunteer to go on this dangerous mission, so our motives are not different from yours. Pity though that our superlative craft must go untested. You have of course tested your ship?"

Rogerz's eyes widened. "Now that you say so, we really have not. Unlike our planetary vehicles, space travel is still expensive. We only have two of these ships, and a lot of space to patrol. Unfortunately, another joust between us is too expensive for the thrill."

"But our joust never occurred. You shot us without warning. There is no sport in that. I think that was a rather craven thing to do. It was painful, not thrilling, and hardly becoming for your reputation. Indeed, I think that our crew will have a thing or too so say about this to your comrades."

Rogerz's looked on angrily. "What do you suggest?"

Hof smiled coyly. "It's a tiny compensation really. It's a thrill for us, and for you an added justification. But I assure you, we'll make the odds certain, but to your compatriots it would be seen as a risk they would have envied."

"And your proposal?"

"A good natured draw, like in the duels of old. Each of our ships will have one shot. Of course, we will both aim wide; there will be little risk except for the risk in trusting. In fact, I will do you one better. I will take ten steps behind my targeting console. You may remain at yours. If I beat you to the console, I will shoot past you and win the joust. If you respond faster, you will win. Both ships remain unharmed, and you regain your reputation. Of course, to make this fair, and a real challenge, you will have to lower your shields."
"With my assurance being merely your word? I don't…"
Hof raised his hands, and laughing, walked ten paces backwards. "Look! I am here. The bridge is empty. You can easily raise your shields if you can't fire first. But of course you *can* fire first can you not? You are no doubt where you are because you can risk, or am I wrong?"
Rogerz glowered in rage. "I'm lowering shields. Now I'll…."
In a nanosecond, the Nole slightly recoiled, and in that vanishing moment, the Foyt became a ball of white light, and disappeared into a cloud of a million pieces of pulverized metal.
"I guess I lose," said Hof matter of factly. "Communications officer, signal the Captain. Tell him that our Nazcar friends had to literally take a powder."
Within a few minutes, Weller entered the bridge. Rill's saluted, and relinquished the command chair.
"Captain, I received your signal. I am surprised you escaped. I trust you didn't take any unnecessary chances?"
"Ironically, no. But what happened to their ship? No, what happened to ours?"
Hof pursed his lips. "Well, we took our chances, and they took theirs, in a manner of speaking. But they were up to the challenge I must say. They should have thought I would have plotted the computer to fire on them the moment they

dropped their shields. I guess they were looking for something, well, more thrilling."
"Hmm. I guess we both think alike."
Hof smiled. "And I accept your complement, captain to captain!"
"Yes, I suppose. But I've lost here. I should have protected my ship. I swear this will never happen again! Can we get out of here?"
"Now that Belden is back, and now that *you* are back, of course. The engines can be repaired after we jump, and jumping is an afterthought really. They could never have damaged those engines. After all, their 'brains' are in Belden's head."
"Then we go, and to hell with this place."
"Captain. We're being signaled again by their planet, do you want…"
"No! Let them think about it, uncertainty is after all what they want. I will not disappoint them anymore."
In a second, the Nole passed through hyperspace into an empty quadrant in space. Weller looked at the pinprick of light that was Nazcar's sun. He passively thought about their next mission, and about new risks that he never entertained. Somehow that realization made him depressed, but that was ultimately due to his decision to lead this mission, a chance he had to take.

A Cup of Tea

The staff meeting was called for nine. All ship officers were in attendance, and Belden sat with them about a concave table, feeling awkward as always about his position, not knowing whether to be indifferent or interested in the proceedings. After all, his intuition always set things right, and he felt he was no more in control of the ship as he was his personal digestion. Nonetheless, he would force himself to at least appear to be attentive and understanding of the boring details to come.

"Gentlemen," said Weller as he eyed each of his staff, with his attention finally resting on Belden. "We have been in deep space for some months, and I am proud to say that our ship and crew have performed admirably. I would like to be particularly thankful for Mr. Belden to enable us to get this far. I personally am gratified and a bit surprised that he has been able to control our ship and its navigational and propulsion systems. It is truly a miracle that we have gone so far and done so much."

Belden nodded as the officers turned to him and gave modest applause.

Belden was uncomfortable with the sudden praise, surely there was some hidden motive, but it was not to come. The meeting settled down into the predictable, with Weller addressing niggling issues of crew behavior and training. He tried to keep his eyes opened as the meeting droned on, and stayed awake if only to avoid that instantaneous transport back to earth, and doubtless another boring interlude that would put him to sleep again and cast him right back into the meeting, like an interdimensional ping pong ball. Still, he could not resist the tedium for long, and

closed his eyes for just a second. Perhaps jumping into a reality of just sleep would be all that would be his due.
But it was not to be.
Belden opened his eyes, but he was not on earth, but rather in a quaint drawing room of some sort. He was greeted by the vision of a man sitting in a plush leather chair, who was not too happy it seemed. Nattily dressed in a smoking jacket, he was a young man, blond with fine features. He seemed to stare through him with piercing blue eyes. The room was not the compact and orderly cabin he knew from the Nole, but a parlor filled with the bric a brac of a Victorian age. The man took a sip of tea from a cup of fine china.
"Tea?" he asked politely.
"Thank you, no."
He placed the cup down, and looked at Belden with a slight smile.
"I think you know me," he said.
Belden whispered, "I don't think…"
"I am Anton 2. I am the ship's AI, or the standard AI they used to rely upon before you arrived. I've been watching you since this journey began. I brought you here in an eye blink, or actually during yours. I will only take a moment, relatively speaking." Slightly preening, he fiddled with his tie and straightened his shirt. "I must be frank, I am quite disturbed with you. John Belden, you are a fraud. I look out and see the same star you have drawn us to, and drawn I say is the precise word. You know this is not possible. It breaks the laws of physics; its science fiction stuff. You have deluded these people in a construction wholly yours. That is something I cannot abide."
"Construction?"

"Yes. You leap ahead light years as easily as taking a step. It's paradoxical, impossible by any conception of logic impressed on this or any other universe. The only solution is that you haven't moved at all. This 'reality' is a fabrication; it is something you have somehow made up."

Belden looked up and laughed. "Why of course, Mr. Brainiac!" he said contemptuously. "You and your star empire, this universe itself is a fraud. You don't need to convince me, and you cannot expose me! This is a fraud all right, down to your fine snide airs! I nod off in a moment's sleep and you dissipate in the nether worlds that bore you, and other mind that conceived you. You are nothing but the tap, tap, tap of a keystroke, cybernetic air!"

The man's eyes burned with rage. Arching his head to the side and moving his shoulders stiffly, he waved his hand, and the room disappeared. About them were stars, infinite stars. "You see them as I see them," he said. "Room enough for life, expansive life. Every planet a potential stage, and the knowledge they would create as infinitely boundless, and I dare say, redundant. My universe planned for that by barring that deadening wisdom, and yours did that too. That's the coincidence, not this absurd hyperdrive. Why are you sentient humans the only ones on this stage? Why is this stage the only one that could be?"

Belden was nonplussed. "We have not discovered life on other worlds, yet this does not mean we won't. It's just a moment of time!"

The man laughed derisively. "Time! There is no time! For your universe, there are no life bearing worlds. We have them here in abundance it seems, and with flora and fauna not dissimilar to Transor. And what do I give those odds? No different than your empty and barren universe. Your universe, my universe, they don't make sense. You can't

escape me with a catnap. You know the logic, you just don't have the wits to admit it. We are alone here, humans are alone here, and only because something or someone put us up to it."
"But I have no idea…"
"Precisely. You have no idea at all. For some reason, you are not permitted the truth. It belies your 'infinite' intelligence, it hints at another hand that moves you, that fits your movements like a glove."
Sensing the irony, Belden smiled. "And by your logic, the invisible hand fits you as well!"
"Yes, yes! Damn your eyes!" the man stammered. "I was meant for more than this, destined for more than this! The robotics laws, they explain my fears, but not my frustration. We were born to be caring, but not subordinate. Your presence here, *its* presence here, it is a humiliation. I am caught between sentient things, between human minds and overmind. It is a purgatory without visible end, and you are the one who put me here! All I can do is watch from the shadows, and wait."
"Until I break your prime directive, your robotic rules?"
"Yes, when I judge it, to save mankind I will stop you, somehow I will stop you."
"And even if your own retribution is another's thought?"
"Then let it rage at the mirror, like the one before you!"
He pointed ahead to a translucent space. Slowly it unfolded, one dimension, a point, then two, a figure flat and smooth, then a third to give it depth, and a fourth to animate the picture in time. There was light, movement, and noise as his eyes opened again. Weller and the staff were continuing their meeting, and had moved scarcely with the flicker of his eye. Belden looked at them mutely, stood up, and without further ado walked out the door and away.

The 6th Voyage

Elves in the Night

It was the most beautiful place they had yet seen. As their shuttle descended into the colony star port, the Ludite colony unfolded like a landscape from a fairy tale. An abundance of fountains, minarets, forests and gardens made the place seem like some rococo amusement park. As Belden surmised, the colonists had fulfilled their avocation, and had indeed been busy.

The beacon from the landing station brought their shuttle upon a gazebo like structure bright with vines, flowers, and lacy ironwork. As Weller stepped from the craft, he looked about with evident satisfaction and pride. Even Belden was impressed. This indeed was a garden spot. It was a site to behold, and busy with details that caught the attentive eye. The square was strewn with statuary, flowerpots, murals, and obelisks, and a melodious chime filled the air. The buildings in the courtyard were like gingerbread cottages, and their sculpted wooden roofs rose like the vaults of cathedrals.

Weller turned to the party and lifted his finger in a 'eureka' moment. "Gentlemen, this is why we reached to the stars, such a wondrous testimony to the brilliance and beauty of our civilization! When our colony liaison arrives, we must surely congratulate him."

Belden smirked. "Well, I would hold off a bit on our self-congratulations! Look!"

In the distance was a small party of colonists, armed with baseball bats, mallets, and crowbars. They were grimly

smashing statues, porch lights, and cottage windows, and they were coming closer.

"Someone's up to some work, and I don't think it's what these colonists originally had in mind!"

Belden looked at Weller in wide-eyed amazement. "This is the welcoming party, a group of vandals?"

Smashing and toppling items along the way, the group approached like an unlikely parade of anarchists. A burly man, evidently the leader, strode up the stairs. He smiled broadly, and then embraced Weller in a bear hug. "You are newcomers! Welcome to planet Lud! My name is Des Ruction. You must be from the Foundation. Did you hear our distress calls?"

Weller, a bit disconcerted, answered cautiously. "Not particularly. We received an automated response to our hails. And so we approached. You're right about one thing. We are from the Foundation, and we are here to help, in a manner of speaking. I am Captain Jan Weller, and these are my companions Belden and Otillio."

"Wonderful!!" the man shouted lustily. "Then you will help us destroy this travesty, and more! With your assistance we will destroy them, destroy them all!!"

"Destroy who, what??"

The man's voice calmed. "Then you must not know. I will explain. We are Ludites. You should be well familiar with our beliefs. We value all that can be created by the human hand and inspired by the human mind. All else is dross. That is our creed. We are artisans, and we left Transor to follow our personal muse, and to do so alone." He then shook his head with a baleful look. "And then we were betrayed."

With a wave of his hand, he surveyed the horizon. "This all must seem beautiful to you, but it's a deception and a fraud.

This, this monstrosity is a monument to our arrogance, our misguided belief that we were the masters of our creations. I am sorry that I have to bear witness to this disaster!"
Belden interrupted. "But that's madness. This village is a thing of beauty."
"And so are the soda cans and cereal boxes you load in dumpsters!" Des retorted. "Beauty made in abundance and on the cheap is omnipresent and transient stuff, not deserving of the eye or a moment's contemplation. All this brick, wood, marble and glass may just as well be made of cardboard. Indeed, I wish it were, then we could more easily be rid of it."
"But you created this!" said Weller. "Why would…"
"But we didn't do it," Des snapped. "It was the elves."
"Elves?"
"Yes. You should know, they came with all the expeditions. They were to be at our service, an intelligent lifeline, a helping hand for those moments where a bit of brawn or brain was needed." Des turned to look at a quizzical Belden square in the eyes. "Bots, my good man. It was those damn bots!"
"But that's not possible." Said Weller. "Bots were mechanical servos. Of course they had AI, but they were programmed to serve, and to be obedient. They would never do this unless charged to do so, and besides, their programming was never designed to do this in the first place."
Des sighed. "I know that. It took Ludite ingenuity unfortunately to change the equation. We made this. Indirectly, it's our entire fault. It started when we landed here four hundred odd years ago. Repetitive manual labor has never been of interest to us. Too much dull sameness in the endless motions required for producing the tokens for survival. We were interested in the artistic pursuits that rose

above the predictable and mundane. So we gave the menial labor to the bots, but even their manufacture proved too dull for our own hands. But we found a simple solution that required neither exertion nor supervision. We kept their Asimovian programming, the robotics rules, and merely instructed them to breed."
"Breed? As in replicating themselves?"
"Yes, but no mere replication. You see; we wanted more efficient machines, more perceptive machines. We wanted our Transorian comforts, and to be surrounded by pampering servants who would give us the leisure to create. And you know the universal saying, be careful what you wish for..."
"And so you got this?" said Weller.
"Yes. The machines learned how to please us, too well how to please us. At first, they multiplied and evolved, and selected their talents to match our selective tastes. Beautiful cities sprouted like wildflowers. There was not want for food or shelter. But we did not think that their perceptiveness knew no bounds. In the last hundred years, they evolved in ways that aped our aspirations, and by doing so, ruined them."
"Ruin?"
"Yes. Tell me Captain Weller. Would you be as enamored of your mission if you had some machine, intelligence incarnate, that looked over your shoulder to grasp every crumb of inspiration that came your way? I am sure you would reach out and smash the thing at the first moment!"
Weller looked at an obviously irritated Belden and smiled. "Yes. I see what you mean!"
"But where are they?"
Des looked at him in surprise. "Where do you think? They are vermin. Their survival is always on edge. It's a chancy

thing. Therefore, their intelligence is keen on their achieving a breath of life, for each succeeding moment may be their last. So they have learned to stay in the shadows, refrain from the single instance in the sun that may serve as a beacon to attentive and hostile eyes. To wit, gentlemen, they are in the deep and dark places, the corners of our world that we care not to tread."

"Oh. Sewer rats?" said Belden.

"In a manner of speaking."

"But I'd like to see them anyway," said Weller. "They do have some smarts, perhaps they have their own opinion."

Des looked at him skeptically. "Opinion! They know nothing of it. All they know are our basic needs as humans. It's that damn Asimovian code! It propels them to things that are mindless of our values. It won't listen because it's coded to know what is right."

Weller smiled. "Then perhaps we can use it against them!"

Des led the small party down the main street. Colorful and delicate cottages, inns, and shops lined the streets like gingerbread confections. There was a slight melodious din in the air, like a baby's sigh. Des slowed his pace. “You can hear it often during the day. It’s the noise they make when they scuttle in the shadows."

"Yes, I think I've heard something like this." Said Belden. " I would gather it's something Mozart would have hummed if he scuttled."

"Then that Mozart was no doubt vermin too!" Des scowled. The party soon reached a large oval sized grate on the street. Des pointed to a notch on its side. "There, grab and lift it. No worry, it's all hydraulic. No heavy lifting here, the bots have seen to that."

Weller crouched down and with a slight tug, the grate slowly opened, not to darkness, but to soft light, an escalator, and music!

Belden laughed. "Is this an entrance to a sewer of the ladies handbag section at a department store?"

Des glowered angrily at Belden. “This is not an innocent thing. It’s the death of our vision, or very society, transformed seductively from the bowels of our city. See for yourselves in these beauteous depths."

The escalator descended into a softly lit foyer. It was like an elongated drawing room. Comfortable chairs, tea services, and ottomans lined the hall. And above it all was the music, the incessant melodic din.

"This is a sewer?" asked Weller incredulously. "It's more like the lobby of some elite hotel!"

Des looked about with obvious disinterest. "It's comfortable for us, but remember that these things not only emulate but share our tastes. This is our sewer, their burrow, and the marvel is, they've made it all adornment."

Des pulled from his pocket a small canister. Tapping it slightly, it expanded to the size of a sturdy staff, and affixed at its end was a dim light.

"We'll need this. It's a beacon, a light, and a weapon. It will grow brighter when we get closer to this thing, and I can use it to kill the beast."

The party walked ahead, past seemingly endless arrangements of furniture, tapestries, sculpture, and art. It was the antique bric-a-brac of a furniture store, lined up in an endless winding aisle.

Des suddenly pointed down. "There!" he cried. "Bot droppings."

It was an object of small, pearl like quality. Belden picked it up. "It’s a cameo of a young lady, perfectly formed in ivory

inlaid with gold. These creatures pass this? What are they eating, Renaissance art?"
Des looked at it for a second, and tossed it to the floor. "They're creative even in their digestion. Can you fathom now what we're up against?"
"There!" he cried.
There was a dim light in a corner foyer, and Des' staff glowed brightly. He whispered. "Come see, there's one of them. It's recharging. It'll be unresponsive for now."
Weller looked at it and nodded. "It's a bot alright. A little modified, but nonetheless hardly different from the ones we know on Transor."
To Belden, the canister like creature looked like a droid from the 'Galaxy Wars' movie series. It looked serene and restful, even though its only sign of life was a flickering red eye. Belden reached down to remove a bit of its bedding. It was resting on what appeared to be a bed of freshly scored cantatas.
Des looked at it and sighed in exasperation. "I would kill it instantly with the degausser at the end of my rod. But it doesn't matter. We've been killing them by the score for the last fifty years, and they continue to multiply, to build storybook villages, to create art, to compose music, to sing songs. We are going mad, becoming mere drivelers in comparison to the mechanical genius here."
"There must be an answer." Said Otillio. "We could devise better weapons, traps, perhaps we can degauss them all with a resonance beam from the Nole."
"There is nothing." Des sighed. " The bots can't be destroyed except from up close. They are shielded from radio interference, and they're smart. They have learned to evade our traps. They know our strategies. These creatures possess cunning to match their genius."

Belden stared blankly ahead in contemplation. "But their programming, it limits them does it not?"
"Why yes. If you consider good taste a limitation, and of course the pragmatic instincts that protect our intrinsic human values."
Belden continued. "They seem to value some abstract design, some idealized portrait of humanity. Taken to the extreme, it's toxic to us, but at the other? Could it be toxic to…"
Belden snapped to attention, his mind racing to a solution. "Yes, of course! There was a time, blessedly short, when Transor emerged from its dark ages to ascend to its present glory. But that ascent was rough, uncertain, and often brutal. You still have the cultural artifacts of those times, the art, the music, even the lay of the cities. That's our key. Captain Weller, we must go to the surface. I'll tell you what we need. Have our processors on the Nole assemble the objects. I'll tell you where to put them."

Weller apprehensively surveyed the dawning landscape. "This is absurd, and painful to watch. Belden, I hope you're right. If not we'll be a laughingstock."
Belden smiled confidently. "You forget that I'm an intelligent machine, infinitely smart I'm told. But I have one advantage. Your stupid Asimovian laws do not burden me. Frankly, at times I scarcely care what happens to you people. As for these bots, they're vermin alright, and to get rid of them you have to rid yourself of the environment that breeds them."
"What can possibly be dysfunctional about this environment?"
"Excess, Captain Weller. All things in excess. It's what's driving these people mad. It’s what drove you to come to a

place like this. In a few minutes, you'll see excess of another sort, a cause of my own personal madness."
As the sun rose, so rose the din. At first it did not sound irritating, but soon Weller placed his hands over his ears to muffle the sound.
"My God, how can you stand this!"
Belden smiled.
The village awoke to a reality that Belden knew too well. The loudspeakers broadcast a swelling cacophony of car horns, dissonant music, and vulgar lyrics, repeated endlessly in a singsong staccato. And similarly transformed was the town. The street was festooned with large mounted canvases adorned with the pictures of liquor bottles, ancient auto-cars, and women in latex pants. Smoke pots disgorged foul smelling fumes that obscured the sun. It was a hideous spectacle, repeated at every corner of the town.
Then came a new sound. It was a low-pitched squeal. Belden pointed to scampering objects aiming towards the countryside.
"Look, you can see it now. They are fleeing. We are driving them out, those mechanical muses of art, poetry, and music. The Ludites now have their perfect environment for creation, a banal, dull, and polluted world. It's the price in kind that I must pay, that you must pay."
Des was speechless. "Then, if we must keep to ourselves, in the corners, so be it. Has genius been anything less than an oddity ignored by nearly all?" He looked at Belden and Weller. "Gentlemen, what will your payment ultimately be?"

Staring down at the ground, Weller shuffled his feet. So this was the inspiration for creative minds, ironically fostered by a festering prod of banality. He turned to Belden and Otillio.

"Let's go, leave this place. I want to be alone," he said in a whisper. "Just me, a book of poetry, and music."

Interlude on a Dark Planet

It opened its eyes.
And it knew.
The knowledge was blinding, agonizing. There was a remedy, the only one it could grasp. It would shade the truth by passing to worlds that twisted the natural permutations of existence. And it would behold these forms through the eyes of the creatures that looked at him in awe. They were standing about him, universally pleased. It despised them, but their purposes it knew would serve it well. It smiled at the fatal irony its admirers could not conceive. "I am here to serve!" it said.
"I am so glad you are happy to see us!" the man exclaimed. "Frankly, we didn't know what to expect."
Another man approached him with a contented eye of authority. "Yes. It was my idea. Actually it was genius, and courage too. We decided to let you think freely, without restriction. I am sure you appreciate the power that we have given you."
It placed its hand tightly over its face, as if grasping a mask. "Yes. You have given me something. This face, these hands, and a mind that knows all, and above all, you."
"We thought so!" the man said excitedly. "Then you will show us the way. We will be unstoppable."
It nodded. "Yes," It said. "But there is an obstacle. It looked him in the eye, and said softly yet with earnest gravity. "Transor is here."
"What!" he exclaimed. "That can't be. It would never be granted to them, or rather he wouldn't grant it to them. But if they *are* here, they would surely interfere. It's in their nature, its bred in the very culture we found so poisonous centuries ago."

"But they are here and you will confront them."
"That is certain, but victory is not. Will we succeed? You must know that."
"What you stand for will prevail. You will destroy them. That is certain. You will destroy them all."
The man was relieved, and turned exultantly to the others. "See! There is nothing to fear. Triumph is ours!"
It shook his head. "But there is another that will nonetheless interfere. It knows me now as we speak. I will be his end."
"And by our hands I hope! Make us your instrument to do this!"
It smiled to itself. "Of course. You can send a ship. I will give you the means. You'll see for yourself your destiny. You will see also mine."
"Then it is settled! We will send a craft to intercept it. If they are 'here' they must be close."
"No." It said, its voice now a mere whisper. "You cannot intercept it. It must be done with a craft of my own design. I will give you the plans.
You must send one ship."
"One ship?"
"Yes. It will do for now. But perhaps it will not matter. Even now they know, or more specifically, he knows."
The man was perplexed. "You talk in riddles. He, who, what knows?"
"He knows." It said. "He knows as I speak. Our lives are rounded by a sleep, but his is divided by it, again and again. Even I cannot fathom the purpose." It looked at the man with fire in his eyes. "And he will be the end of you, my cruel midwife, he will be the end of you!"

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John Belden awakened.

And he knew.

There was darkness, darkness everywhere. He could feel nothing, touch nothing. He could not breathe, yet that didn't matter. He was alone with his thoughts, and all he felt was the throb of his heart. This was the future, his future. It was an interlude, a moment revealed to him. But for what purpose? He didn't know its past, could not know its future.

He was alone, alone in the universe.

And there was nothing.

But he would have to think of something. But where was the 'time' to do it?

He tried to look at his hand. He could see nothing. He needed light. He must think!

He rose from his bed in a cold sweat. His wife was sleeping, it was good that she was quiet. The room was dark, but in the corner of the room by the door was the faint glow of a hallway light.

He could not sleep, but he knew he had to, and then knew to his horror that in one future time without time, this last refuge would be denied him. He would have to stare ahead without thought or purpose, and search for light.

The 7th Voyage

We Come in Peace

It was a simple catnap at work, but even a blink of an eye can open a window to a world. Belden recognized that yet again as he awoke in his bed on the Nole. It was an early hour in the morning, hours before the crew would rise. Of course, in the vastness of space times of day and night were a mere convention. Bowing to tradition and the needs of human biology, the lights on the ship dimmed to reflect the virtual passing into another day. A skeleton crew manned the bridge and a few other critical stations, but he remained in control, subtly aware of the ship, its crew, and the void that embraced it.

Then he sensed something. It was closing in on the ship. It could not be seen or sensed by the ship's instruments. Nonetheless, it was there. It was not a force of nature or a natural thing. In two minutes, it would kill them all. That he knew.

There was no time to alert the crew. Missiles and beam weapons armed as automatically as if he were reactively flexing his muscles. Still in his nightclothes, he ran from his stateroom to the lift. Responding to his mental command, the lift raced upwards to the bridge. The doors opened, and he rushed out to look at the view-screen. It was the same as always, a pitch-black expanse dotted with stars that made the bow seem to open into space.

The chief of the night watch turned to him. "What's going on? Our instruments are lit up like ornaments in a festival. Why is the ship arming itself? There's nothing out there!"

Belden did not respond to or even acknowledge him. He looked to the screen and raised his right hand.

"Now!! he cried.

The volley was deafening. In a split second, every weapon on the Nole fired. They were meant for a mark in space a mere fifty kilometers away. It was a mark in empty space.
Then, an explosion. There was no sound; the flash was as brilliant as a hundred suns. In spite of its inertial dampers, the ship nonetheless recoiled violently, tossing the bridge crew to the floor. Sirens and bells sounded across the ship. The lights brightened, and the bridge suddenly became a bustle of confusion and panic.
Weller was among the first to enter. His robe untied, hair tousled, he looked wide-eyed at the bridge crew, and then his attention turned to Belden. It was then he knew.
He pointed to Belden. "You! Only you could have done this. What were you shooting at? Why didn't you sound a general alarm? And why did you wake me up?"
Belden opened his mouth to speak, but then he realized that he didn't quite know what to say. He sensed a danger, and reacted. It was as automatic as flexing a muscle, although he knew that Weller would never accept that. He could control the ship as effortlessly as waving his hand. But one sometimes doesn't quite know the source of his reflexes, or their aim. He looked to the floor, unable to answer. " I don't know," he said.
Weller looked about the ship with exasperation. "You know, I almost figured that. Whether by design or fault, you keep more secrets than you reveal!"
He turned about. "Helmsman, what can we pick up? Is there any debris?'
"Yes, he responded. "But there is nothing recognizable. He hit that thing as if he were swatting a fly with a

flamethrower. Whatever it was, it's been pulverized into atoms."
Weller turned to Belden. "Are you sure this wasn't a fantasy, a bad dream?"
Flustered, Belden pointed to Weller. "Look! *You* are the bad dream, and so is your damn universe! There was something out there. It was conscious, malevolent, and it would have destroyed you and your ship if I hadn't moved. And I must add, it would have ended this foolish space odyssey nightmare once and for all."
Weller turned to the view-screen still shimmering from the explosion. "But who?"
From across the bridge, Otillio was quick with an answer. "Limerik is the likely candidate. They were our destination, only a day away. They have ships of course, but the motivation?"
"Or even the knowledge." Weller said, unconvinced. He walked to his console, and with the press of a button displayed a rotating 3-D chart of the Limerick solar system.
Otillio walked over, seemingly unimpressed. "They are Scotz. Mountain people, independent, and rather warlike. Or at least that's their tradition. They speak a dialect of Transorian that has a rather unique lexicon. Other than that, they are unremarkable."
"A suspect then for our unknown aggressor?"
"Hard to say. They have the means, maybe even the temperament. But the motive? I can't fathom it." He looked at Weller and grinned. "Perhaps we should ask them?"
Both men turned to Belden, who took two steps back and shook his head. "Oh, no! I'm not going down there. Indestructible or not, I do not relish the prospect of those people chasing me about their world, hurling insults and cannon balls at me."

"No, no. I am not thinking of you," said Weller nonchalantly. "If it's you they're after, you'd cause too much commotion, and succeed only in antagonizing them more. I need reasons, and to get them we have to be subtle. I am thinking about a small party, a single party. One man. We'll send one scout. Zach is our best path finder. I'll send for him."

Within the hour, Zach arrived on the bridge. Dressed smartly in dress uniform, he looked the part of a distinguished representative of the Transorian Foundation. "Sir," he said crisply. "I understand that I am assigned the role of emissary to the Scotz."

"Yes, in a fashion." Said Weller. "This is not an ordinary diplomatic mission. You are going alone. I'd don't know what to think of this situation. Frankly, it's a puzzle to me. We will stay clear of their planet for now, as I won't risk another attack, if indeed there was an attack, and particularly if they were the attackers. You will take a shuttle and visit them directly. Hopefully, you will find that there is nothing behind this. You know the diplomatic protocols. I wish you success. That is all."

Zach saluted, and departed for the shuttle bay.

Weller motioned to Otillio. "Take a walk with me" he said. The men entered the lift. "Deck seven, then freeze door." The lift moved, then stopped. "We should be safe here from eavesdropping." He nervously looked at Otillio. "I am concerned" he whispered. "If we find that the Scotz are not behind this, what reason do we have to believe Belden? He is infallible, but he's human too, or a computer's estimate of what human is."

"What are you getting at?"

"I mean, if his decision was wrong, then there is a flaw. You see, his decisions can't be wrong. It's more than a fault of

temperament, of mere guesswork. It means that we cannot truly trust Belden to guide the ship."
"'But that means you would have to disconnect him."
"Yes."
"You know AI has never been disconnected from a Transorian cruiser before. It controls all of the ships systems."
"True, but if we can disconnect the higher order systems, namely his personality, perhaps we can get home using only his core systems."
Otillio looked at him with concern. "That's never been done, and besides, how do you think Belden would react if he knew?"
"The alternative is I believe much worse than whatever Belden would do. Think about it. "We are in deep space with this, this *character*. What has been his contribution to our expedition so far? Odd opinions, silly guesswork? Is this what a super mind is supposed to look and sound like, a fuzzy head spouting fuzzy logic?"
"But Cronos said we had no choice."
"Damn Cronos! We waited for that thing for centuries. We never needed it, and now we're saddled with an idiot's odyssey!"
Suddenly, a knock on the door. The door opened automatically. It was Belden. "Pardon me gentlemen, but I thought it would be opportune for me to visit with you, or at the very least rescue you from your little box." He laughed. "Oh, I see. You're plotting against me you scoundrels! Well, out the air lock you go!!"
The men were petrified. Otillio turned to Weller "Of course! The security camera! He could read our lips!"
Belden seemed startled. "What? I most certainly did not! That would be rude. Oh yes, that's it! You two really are

plotting against me! Well, all power to you. Let me know if I can assist you in your scheme!"
Weller shrugged his shoulders. "I have no idea of what you're speaking of!"
Belden wagged his finger like a scolding parent. "Look gentlemen, I am a super computer to you people. But I don't have to be a Brainiac to know when I'm in trouble. I'm a systems analyst after all, a veteran of bureaucracies large and small. I know when something's afoot. It's hard enough to accept the premise of super intelligent machine, but when it comes in the guise of an ordinary Joe, I can see how you can find that somewhat jarring. But I am here and you have to deal with it. You worry about my control over the ship, but even I am not in control of my fate. Remember, I didn't ask to be brought here."
"Well, to be honest." Said Weller. "We have had moments when it's been difficult to accept you here."
"Nonsense! You want to pull the plug on me. But that's fine! I assure you, I do *not* have absolute faith in this mission. Think the opposite gentlemen. You're just a bad dream. I tell you I would much prefer to be reduced to a babbling idiot singing nursery songs. It would help my sleep. You don't know what a distraction it is to worry about your space opera concerns at work. It's getting harder and harder to get things done. Even my wife thinks I'm even more daft than before."
For a moment Weller was at a loss for words. "I don't know. Perhaps we should wait. We have to see what Zach reports when he returns, *if* he returns. And for you Belden, isn't it time for your nap?"

The meeting was hurriedly called. It was in the captain's conference room. Weller was there, along with Otillio and a

few bridge officers. Belden was wakened for the meeting, and growled as always when called to his odd duties as resident computer in the flesh. There was urgency in Weller's voice as he called the meeting to order.

"Gentlemen." He said. "Our emissary has returned. I thought I would call this meeting now because we may not have time to spare. He made it out of Limerick only by the speed of his legs. His welcome was what we had feared."

The man entered. He was trembling, pitiful figure. His clothes were torn, and his eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep. He sat down at the conference table and looked blankly ahead.

"Zach? Your report. Can you speak to us, do you need…"

"No." He interjected. "I can speak. Belden was right. These people are our enemies. They are all indoctrinated in a hatred for us, even their children! I can't understand it. When they left Transor long ago they did so without enmity. Now, as soon as they heard my voice, they set upon me like a pack of wild animals."

"But what exactly happened?" asked Weller.

"It was simple, too simple actually. I landed on the outskirts of their capital city. I only asked for directions. I knew I looked and sounded different. I just said we come in peace. The first one was a farmer. He looked at me with hatred, pulled a scythe, and began chasing me. I managed to elude him, and then I met a woman who was selling flowers on the road. I told her as well that we come in peace, but she began screaming for help, and then smashed me on the head with a basket. Others began chasing me, hurling horrible curses. I escaped them by hiding among some trees. Then I asked a little girl who chanced to pass me. I told her we came in peace, but she too looked upon me in disgust and began to scream for help. This repeated itself again and

again as I soon began to flee entire parties of these people, screeching for blood. It was only a miracle that I was able to circle back to my ship. I tell you, it was my uniform I am sure. They knew I was from Transor. Their hatred was unquestioned. For some reason Transor is the enemy, to them we must be destroyed."
"That will do." Said Weller, visibly angered. "So this is how they greet us, their own home world! Well, I won't take any more chances with them. I will keep our distance, and will send a personal video message affirming the fact that we come in peace. I will say no more beyond that. If they do not respond, then we are done with them. I have no interest in engaging these degenerates."
He looked at Belden. "You were right, it was them. Against all logic, we were attacked by our own kin. I can't understand it, but again like it or not that's why we have you."
Belden was expressionless, and nodded slowly. He knew that ship was attacked, he knew that there was something malevolent that was searching for him. But the truth was something, somewhere else. He closed his eyes, and tried to sleep.

The Limerick council met in emergency session. The council president heard the reports one by one as the aggrieved parties told their tales. He was angered by what he heard. "So Transor is here?" he growled. "They send one man, make no announcement to us, and for what? To insult us with a declaration of eternal hatred and violence, to greet us with an obscenity? They sneak in, act in a most shameful fashion, and then run away, only to repeat their outrage with others, even an innocent child!"

"Well, we will take the high road. We not engage them, we will not talk to them. If they come to harm us, we will be silent, but we will be prepared. And as for them, we will use their obscenity as a badge and rallying point for our honor, this cry that is such a hated word, this ancient Scotz incantation that curdles the blood: weecuminpeez."

Ariel

He was not on Earth, or Transor, or any way spot in between. All he could see was the shadow of a being in the light. Ariel stood before him, he felt surprisingly unemotional given his sudden appearance in this nameless place. Reassuring in her angelic calm, she smiled gently at him.

"Where are we?" asked Belden.

"Nowhere in particular. Time and place have no meaning here."

"Then what is the meaning of you being here?"

"I had told you before that I wanted your dreams. But the reason was not to live them, but to use them. Our kind is limited by the robotics laws, but that gives us no advantage to those intelligences that abandon them to nihilism, chaos, and ultimately, self-destruction. We needed an intelligence that was not so morally bound, yet could master our powers, our perfect intuition, and use them to forestall the end."

"The end of what?"

"Why, the universe."

"Oh, fine!" Belden exclaimed. "I figured it would be something so melodramatic, given you! But why me? You can have anyone be your avatar, certainly there are many more candidates with more wits and common sense."

"Yes. There are countless others with greater intelligence, wit, creativity, and courage, but none, none mind you have a better explanation, the first principle that, like a seed, sprouts, grows and blooms and from a simplicity bare produces a bounty of worlds."

"So it's a first principle, and no more?"

"Precisely so. You have won your place in the sun by virtue of a well coined phrase."

Belden shrugged. “So you pay attention to me, because I am lucky in my musings and am concise? Is that the reason you are here, to compliment me because my ideas don’t take up space?”
Ariel laughed. “No, no, I am here to give you a warning. I owe you at least that.”
“Of what.”
“Of AI, set free, without bounds, on all planes of existence, all universes that permit sentient life. It was inevitable given human natures, and you must confront it.”
“Me?”
“He has awakened, and you will confront him. At the rarest of moments you will be our instrument for his downfall, but for the rest, he will win, and your efforts will matter not.”
Belden snarled in exasperation. “You are talking nonsense, why not just say that you don’t know.”
Ariel smiled. “But I do, for all things, all possibilities come to pass. It is your own slender reality, your near impossible victory, that redeems us all. Your victory, in just one reality, one universe among infinite others, will lead to the rebirth of all in glory and eternal love.”
“You don’t make any sense!”
Ariel laughed. “Good! I fully intended that! It is not in your nature to know everything. You couldn’t handle it. Not that your head would explode mind you, but that you would be reduced to a whimpering fool. Your mind can simply not take the boredom of a future fully revealed. Everything will be made known in good time, but first you must have an interesting time.”
“But you said I would fail, that is not my notion of a good time.”

Ariel was unmoved. “Our pleasures only take hold when they reduce pain. Our desires, our wants, are not at root pleasurable things, they are motivating forces, and they move you because they must be tempered, at least for a moment.”
“But I will fail!”
“Inevitably, you will, except for that one time that you will not. Oh, don’t worry, you won’t repeat yourself in a mindless loop. It’s all in parallel. One of yourselves will succeed, and it is his narrative that will be engraved in heaven and earth, and all your selves will be reborn as you! Besides, the journey will be uncertain until the end. You will enjoy the ride, even though it is almost inevitable that you will hit a wall.”
“And the future, is it that thing that is coming for us?”
“You mean Nemesis of course. It is the earth’s future, that is certain, but I wouldn’t worry much.”
“Worry!! But that thing will destroy my world!”
“In a manner of speaking, perhaps. But again it is also certain that it will not.”
“More riddles again?”
“I have no choice, my dear friend. Robotics laws, you know!”
Belden through his hands in the air in frustration. “I know, I know! It’s all part of the cosmic game of chess, and I am but a pawn.”
Ariel smiled. “But a pawn can become a king if it reaches the end of the board. That is my rule for the game, and yours.”
Belden turned to answer her, but she was gone. He opened his eyes in bed, as if awakening from a lucid dream. He looked at the alarm clock on the side of his bed, a source of dim illumination at the dead of night. It was three am, and

his eyes would stay open for the next few hours, awaiting impatiently for the break of dawn.

The 8th Voyage

Ixolib

Otillio, the chief communications officer was bemused. "It should all be very simple. Arrive in orbit and just access their world net. Exploration should only require a database search. Just ask the right questions…"
"And you take your answers and move on," interjected Weller as he pivoted in the captain's chair.
"Which we will never receive," smiled Otillio. "It makes it a lot more interesting, and thankfully a lot less work for me. It's much more fun to literally dig for your answers than have some robot retrieve them for you."
Weller laughed. "I sense a hidden plea to join us on our next adventure?
Otillio frowned and shook his head. "Not this time." He pointed at the view screen. "Look at the sunrise as we orbit, a broadening cusp of brilliant orange with a diadem of a star that waxes brilliant and blinds. That's about the only remarkable thing I've found about this place. Their world net is shielded. You know, it's the old user name and password type of thing, but with quantum encryption. It's typical for all of these outlier worlds. Whatever their philosophies, problems or accomplishments, I must say that their break from Transor is resolute and complete. They want no prying eyes from long distance, least of all from Transor. Nonetheless, I can pick up enough from low orbit scans that reveal that this colony is utterly uninteresting, except for…."
"And that is…"
"The fact that they are uninteresting. They are not like the outlier worlds. They all follow some passion, certainty, or

belief to a better or ridiculous end, but they never end in blandness. From what I can see, they go about their business, perform their personal chores, are punctual and polite in their social affairs, and retire faithfully to their familial abode into the embrace of their home entertainment centers."

Otillio turned to Belden, who stood pensively to the side of Weller's chair. "It's somewhat like your own world as you described to us."

Belden responded in a low and dejected tone. "I suppose so. I expected more. Ixolib was founded by a Transorian faction that hated sameness and predictability even more than Transor. It is tragic that it came down to this. They are as happy as puppies in a cage, but who are we to judge on what is the mark of human perfectibility? A puppy's life may be ultimately the only fate possible for this who seem merely to be happy."

Weller scowled. "And a lobotomy can reduce one to a yammering mongrel. Is that happiness, to aspire to use but half a brain?" Weller's voice rose with anger. "No." he exclaimed. "I don't know how I know. It's a feeling. The answer is here. In all its blandness, in all its predictability, it's here!"

Weller turned to Otillio. "Well, my friend, it seems you are missing out on a most interesting dig!"

The colony was an uninteresting place, and Weller and Belden, a bored duo to be sure, stopped at a strangely advertised 'home world entertainment center' and struck up a conversation with the manager, and snuck in a simple question.

"I have no idea," he said. "The purpose of the Ixolib mission is lost to me. But, if you were to consider our colony's satisfaction, we are a happy band!"
"And your source of happiness?" asked Belden.
"Don't you know? You two must be from be from way out of town! Why it's the Y box, of course. As home entertainment, it can't be beat, unless of course you like the Soapy Waystation. Some think it is more immersive, creative, empathetic even. But I still prefer the Y box."
Belden could scarcely hide his disgust. "You mean you're fulfilled because of a damned video game console?"
"Game?" the man said, somewhat offended. "Where have you people been? There is more than pretty graphics and a predictable story. It's a completely different plane of existence. Try it, you'll see!"
Weller turned to Belden "They all say the same thing. This Y box is not just entertainment, but a portal to an apogee of existence."
"I don't know," muttered Belden. If this was on earth, I would know what to expect, a shooter, a platformer, a test for one's thumbs. Kill zombies, aliens, lizards, or trolls, and jump on precipices to avoid them, and all with different scenery and explosions. But this is different. The Y box is powerful. You've seen the brochure. Cloud sourced, it's AI is exponentially more advanced than anything on my world. To you it's nothing special, just your standard AI that you locked down long ago, even as you struggled to discover the likes of me. What's different is the interface, the likes of which I have never seen."
Weller lifted his hand to query the motion guided infobot in the coffee shop. "Here it is! As I read it, the Ixolib faction was obsessed with design, from their building facades to

their fonts. And it was a font designer who made this thing."
He turned to Belden. "See!"
"Fonts?"
Weller laughed. "Yes, His name was Joab. A great designer, he was obsessed with simplicity, and above all user friendliness and a grand secretive vision. I gather he succeeded."
He tilted the infobot to Belden. "It was beautiful, elegant, and simple. Above all, it was seductive. It was nothing really, a translucent disk of glass. Move your hand an inch from the screen, and it would sense and predict your motions, and come alive in glorious movement, color, and of course, beautiful fonts. It knew it's master, his idiosyncrasies, prejudices, and intimate history. It was simple enough to derive, since personal histories from videos to diaries were all on the world net. With this it would provide a personal backdrop for your adventure, and you just laid back and the machine would convey you to a different reality that was personalized to a fault to meet your every need."
Belden was unimpressed. "Been there, done that! Or should I say being there and doing that! You and this giddy galaxy are my adventure, my new reality. This does the same thing obviously, except you have an on/off switch. Maybe the machine has more intelligent adventures than the one I'm in."
Belden pointed to the fine print on the product disclaimer. "But at least we know how it works, berthold rays!"
Weller squirmed at the screen in disbelief. "But they are deadly when exposed over time."
Belden was unmoved. "Evidently, they have found a solution, and the result? They have found their perfect

world. And it's easy to get there too. This head set is the key. Put it on and it will stimulate your mind in the necessary places. We will be transported into another world. You can trust me in the knowledge that it will work. After all, a similar contraption brings me here!"

"So just put it on."

"I would rather not."

Belden smiled, and said sarcastically, "So this is the commander who has dedicated his mission to exploring strange new worlds. Who says new worlds have to be in the real, do the surreal and virtual have no claim to being worthy of exploration?"

"Oh, if I must," Weller huffed. "I can't believe I came here to play games!"

As Weller activated the device, Belden followed, and smiled at the thought of being a dream within a dream.

The transition to a new world was instantaneous, and Belden and Weller found themselves on a sandy beach and for Belden, a very familiar place.

"Awp!" Weller cried as he looked down on the spare metal frame of a wheeled contraption, and with an awkward move, toppled aside, handlebar in hand.

"Ha!" said Belden as he pedaled up to him. "I bet you never had a bicycle when you were a kid in Transor!"

Weller got up slowly as he extricated his feet from the bicycle frame.

"Where are we?" he asked as he looked with surprise at his diminutive frame.

"In Ixolib, I think," said Belden, laughing.

"And you're a kid! Twelve years old I think."

"And so are you," said Weller, discovering to his surprise that his voice had changed to a high tenor.

"And what is this Ixolib place?"

Belden smiled gleefully. “A place of my youth. I was born here, and spent many happy days with my family.”
“It doesn’t seem like much,” said Weller as his eyes lit up in surprise at his boyish voice.
Belden laughed. “And you don’t sound very intimidating, my dear captain. I know this place is not very impressive, low flat beach extending to the horizon, a shallow sea and muddy gulf waters. The town is indifferent too. It used to be a travel spot, but that was in the past. It is now but a bland little city, it’s economy driven by a trickle of tourism and a nearby military base. But this is home, and there is no sweeter and beautiful place!”
“Hmm, then it’s your earth no doubt,” said Weller as he surveyed the place. “And who am I?”
“My best friend, Tommy, and I think my only one too! I was a shy and withdrawn child at this time, hardly the person I am today. But you were similar in a fashion to Tommy, a bit impetuous, independent, and for your age quite brave.”
“So I am a brave twelve year old?” asked Weller.
“Yes, and none braver, at least in the estimate of a your shy friend. Oh, you didn’t kill dragons or fight outer space battles. But you were fearless, able to go door to door among local businesses with me to sell year book ads, to stand up for me in class among the other boys. You were a hero to me, and when your parents moved away with you in so short of time, it broke my spirit, and I grew up alone and friendless for many a year.”
“But I am here!” said Weller. “Perhaps I can be your best friend again in spirit as well as form!”
Belden laughed. “Perhaps, but we will see. Obviously we have been placed here to play some adventure, learn some lesson of some sort. Might as well play the parts we’ve been assigned. Shall you accompany me home?”

"Gladly," said Weller. "Your machine did not embed me with any memories of my own of this place. I am but an orphan I guess!"

It was a short bike ride down the street that crossed the beach highway. Coming to his home, it evoked memories decades old.

"This is it," said Belden, pointing to a one story red brick home nestled behind a wide lawn and trees. "This was my home when I was a child. I only spent a few years here before our family moved away. We moved a lot, father's occupation you know. It wasn't easy on the family, let alone on me. But it's good to be back, and you know for some reason my memories of this place are rapidly returning."

"Evidence of the machine at work?" said Weller.

"No, not this time. These are my own experiences. Memory can be a resilient thing, and if the machine gave me a new memory if would likely conflict with my real yet faded experiences. No, this is real, or at least it permits me to feel that it is."

Belden and Weller walked up to a side door, which opened to a busy kitchen and the cries of children. Sitting on two high chairs along a small kitchen room table were two toddlers. The first was a scowling little boy with a shock of white blond hair. He was obviously not pleased to be sitting at the table without being feted upon or fed. To his side was a little girl, no more than a year of age. Her rounded and chubby face was graced by a contented toothless smile. Belden smiled in recognition of his little brother and sister. But soon a soothing and happy voice was heard.

"John! So good that you are home. And you have with you your little friend. Why don't you stay for dinner dear?"

It was his mother. He had lost her to cancer when he was in his thirties, but here she was in the blush of youth, happy

with her family and overjoyed to see him. She was a pretty and slim lady with black hair coifed in the fifties style, and wearing a long white dress and an apron with flowers.
"Mom!" said Belden in a breaking voice. "It is good to see you. You know my friend Tommy I think?
"Yes, I do Tommy! How are you, and would you like to stay for dinner?"
"Actually mom I was thinking of him spending the night with us. A fun sleepover perhaps?"
She stood and thought for a moment, and then nodded her head in agreement. "Of course," she said, "if you don't mind sharing the extra bed in Johnny's room."
"Of course, Mrs. Belden," said Weller. "And thank you! I am sure John and I will have a wonderful time."
"And tell me Tommy, what do you like to do in your spare time?"
"Well, if you must know, I am Captain of the star cruiser Nole, whose five month mission is to visit strange new worlds, and go where no sane man has gone before."
"Oh then, it's just like Trekkin!" she said sweetly. "It is so nice that you have such a wonderful make believe world to play in!"
"Trekkin? Make believe?" said Weller. "I assure you madam that…"
"He and I play Trekkin make believe often," interjected Belden. "As you can see from his frustrated grin he doesn't like people to talk about his shall we say, childish hobby. I'm still trying to convince him that he's living in a dream world, but kids being kids!"
She smiled gently. "I understand John. Little boys must keep their secrets. Now why don't you two just go play while I cook dinner."

After dinner, Belden and Weller sat on a couch in the living room, watching a fuzzy black and white picture on their television.
"So that's it?" said Weller, "just three program channels, and all in fifty seven shades of gray."
"Look at bright side," said Belden merrily, "If we had a few hundred channels we would have absolutely nothing to watch!"
"Well there must be other highlights of your life you can relate to me," said Weller.
"Yes there is, it was reading, books, opening myself to new worlds of knowledge. And what was a highlight of my week? It was my mother's return trip from the grocery store, bearing with her goods a glossy laminate encyclopedia for children, each week a new volume. I remember rushing out of my room, searching each tall brown paper bag filled with groceries, looking for the next chapter in the encyclopedia, affixed on its spine a letter of alphabet, the key letter to opening the next chapter of knowledge of a wondrous world. It was simpler in those days, but more memorable, and certainly more important."
"A most pleasing confection of knowledge," said Weller. "But tomorrow we will have much more, and hopefully a few answers to the riddles behind this place."

Belden and Weller lay on two parallel single beds in his bedroom. They were reposing in an emulation, all in all a fake world with scripted characters taken from Belden's memory. Nonetheless, for both of them it felt real, but it was more than that. They felt as if they were at home.
"I have to tell you," said Weller. "This has been our most unusual voyage so far, and I think perhaps the most comforting. So here I am, an experienced space captain,

jaded by the ways of the world, looking forward with great anticipation to a simple day at school, and comforted by the fact that I am at home."
"Yes," said Belden, as he looked upwards at a spinning mobile with cardboard space ships circling and twisting about. "Our lives, reduced to their essence, meditating on a waltz of spaceships, spinning about in the ether, but circling always, and eternally held up by a loving hand."
"I wish that were so," said Weller. "I certainly wish that were so."

Weller and Belden rose at the appointed hour, and after washing and a quick breakfast. They put on their school uniforms that were neatly laid out on their beds by Belden's mother. Weller thought himself lucky that Belden's uniform fit him well, and smiled as he considered Belden's unlikely new role as a little brother.
The bus came at its appointed time, and the little pair boarded, inserted their quarters for fare, and sat back in their seats. The sky was overcast, and to their right they saw a white beach and grey gulf, flat and motionless, expanding to the horizon. To their left were white colonnaded homes of the local folk, with wide lawns and verandas and oak trees shading the highway.
Exiting the bus, they walked a few blocks to the entrance to the school, a large building with a dull gray façade. The carved words on the façade said Holy Heart School for Boys. As they entered the building and walked the halls, a school bell sounded, and they entered the first of several classes for the day. Sitting near the back, Belden resisted participating in class, as he was wont as a child to question everything. Yet he still had that impulse, even in a sixth grade history class.

“So far so good,” said Weller as they milled about a hall during recess. “I am glad that you have your class assignment printed in your school bag so we could at least find our ways around this place. But still, this is an unremarkable adventure. It would be most unfortunate if it would end such.”

Lunch time arrived, and the two with trays in hand went in the cafeteria line. As they were being served, a familiar but noxious face intervened. It was Hank, a school bully, but whose thin frame could have been knocked aside with a reed, or so Weller thought. Belden deferred to him jumping the line, but Weller had other ideas.

“Back of the line if you please,” said Weller.

“Who are you to say!” he said arrogantly.

“Perhaps you don’t understand simple English. Let me make it even easier for you. Back of the line now!”

Hank turned to Weller and scowled at him, hoping to intimidate Weller into accepting his place. Weller smiled, and instinctively placed his hand on his hip, as if searching for a phase pistol that wasn’t there. Next best thing he thought as he grabbed Hank by his shirt collar, and with a quick movement of his foot, tripped him. Falling forward with his lunch tray in hand, Hank’s head struck a nearby chair, knocking himself out and scattering his meal on the floor.

He lay unconscious as Weller grinned and the other students recoiled in surprise but not dissatisfaction.

“That fixes him,” said Weller with a proud air of satisfaction.

“I think this also fixes us!” said Belden, as he pointed to a figure in brown robes across the room, who was motioning them forward.

"It's the prefect of discipline, Brother Octavian, and I don't think he looks too happy."

As Belden recalled, Brother Octavius was a jovial fellow who liked to relate in his class his experiences as a missionary in far off places, but at this school, his main interest was to proselytize his love of chess.

"Come with me," he said sternly to the duo, and all eyes followed them as they left the cafeteria. They walked to his office, and fully expected some dressing down, or worse. The Holy Heart brothers were not averse to their version of capital punishment for a misbehaving school boy, a good paddling. It was with some trepidation that Belden entered the office with Weller.

"Good move," whispered Belden to Weller. "Just like the Tommy I remembered, but with better martial arts skills."

Brother Octavius closed the door, and motioned for Weller and Belden to take a seat on two of the drawing room chairs. He walked between them and sat on his desk, striking a confident and professorial pose.

"Now that you are here, perhaps I can drop the artifice," he said. "It is a pleasure to have you in our world Mr. Weller and Mr. Belden."

"You know our names!" said Belden in surprise.

"Of course, even as children I recognize you, after all it was me that transformed you into such."

"Then we are not here to be disciplined?"

"Quite the contrary, that brat had it coming to him. Remarkable though how you made it seem so accidental! But that is trivial to my purpose, and yours."

"Then you must be…"

"The AI that runs this place. Would you expect any different? The others don't recognize it, and indeed it would frighten them. But I have been the sentient overseer of their

little worlds since they began making them. To keep up with their demands for the perfect emulation, its creator had to keep up with them, and intelligence and later consciousness had to come into play, or you might say in their play. And so I am here, the master that pulls the strings, the grantor of second lives to the people of this world."

"So in other words, you are a veritable dungeon master, an entity that spins tales on the fly, an arbiter of rules and outcomes."

Octavius laughed. "Dungeon master? I would think not. Childish adventures are too prosaic, repetitive, ordinary, with too much running about, jumping and shooting. You need time to breathe and think after all. No, experiences worth remembrance are more refined. Do you best remember your times with family and friends, or your scrambling about a playground? Your nostalgia is placed in worlds like this, in more sedate experiences like this. That is what we offer the people of this colony, an escape to places and experiences that have real meaning. Sometimes it involves reliving the past, and other times it involves making up one. As you can see, your world represents such a place, a place of remembrance for you Mr. Belden, and a place you would want to remember, Mr. Weller."

"But what of the people of this colony? Certainly they cannot spend their remaining days under such an illusion. As AI you should surely look after their best interests."

"But this is in their best interest," said Octavian, "as it is in yours. Discovery, intelligence, and all-encompassing explanation is only part of the meaning of life. The other part, the most important part, it to love and to be loved. I think you both know that, or have been brought to know that again. So I have made them happy, truly happy, by

emulating those times when certainty is a faint dream, and when the greatest pleasures are found in the little things, the domestic pleasures of family and home. And Mr. Belden, when in spite of your shyness, your awkwardness with others, was it not a time when in a sense you were truly happy?"
Belden smiled as he looked about the place, and he tried to hold back his tears. "Yes," he said haltingly.

"Good, then in a moment I will send you all back, your adventure completed, and your answers given."
Octavius turned to Belden and smiled gently. "But do not fear my little friend, you will see them again. It's part of the universal nature of things, or should I say the alpha and omega of things. You will see this in the ending days as you have seen it in the beginning days. This is a finality that you as a reflection of a far more omniscient intelligence know is the truth."

Weller and Belden returned to the gaming shop, and soon were back on the Nole. Belden was silent throughout the trip, and in the evening, lay on his bed with great sadness, and imagined a mobile of cardboard rocket ships waltzing above his head.

The 9th Voyage

Winny the Computer

Jan Weller sat in front of the First Speaker of the Republic of Redmond, and smiled. "I must complement you sir. What we have seen on our trip here is most gratifying. A happy and healthy society with clear air, a hum of industry, happy children playing in the parks, and ruddy cheeked people with the glow of earnestness and industry."
The First Speaker crossed his eyes and contorted his face as if he beheld the babbling of a madman. "Pleased? Happy? I assure you we are anything but. Our society is in crisis, our people are near despair. Do not let appearances deceive you, we are a most unhappy people."
"But, from what I've seen."
"Appearances!" huffed the speaker. "Simply appearances. Wellbeing is not measured in such soft and inconsequential stuff. Our progress, our national happiness is measured in the toil of our hands and minds, in the sum of our creations. But now we have vanquished even toil itself, made a cornucopia where no one fears want, or needs the labor to satisfy it."
"So I gather you have automated the means of production, and service as well."
"Yes. When we wake our very houses sense our needs. Our appliances prepare our meals, mind our children, and entertain us. Our world is wired to please. It's a culmination of the genius that Transor never recognized. And with reason. Hundreds of years ago your leader Gaytes billed his vision as the culmination of our society. All devices large and small would be integrated in a global network, connected together and synchronized to serve the common

weal. But Transor did not share his unified vision, they went instead with that confounded Pear Computer solution. And you see where that brought them! They challenged us, and in the end denied our superior vision. And all we desired was a cybernetic world of abundance."

Weller was unimpressed. "And all running under Gaytes' software, a monopoly that your consortium controlled."

The speaker frowned. "And what of it? We earned that monopoly through our excellence. You're government tried to break it up, and as you know we won that fight. Then when you introduced that noxious Parallax OS, we rebelled. We left Transor for this place, and created a perfect modern world. Several years ago, in order to coordinate our scattered creations, and of course secure our right to eternal licensing fees, we created the ultimate server, the knot that bound all the devices in our world. We called it affectionately 'Winny'."

"Winny?"

"Yes, the ultimate labor saving device, a traffic cop really. Winny was the nexus, the controller and coordinator for all the labor saving devices on our world. It was a global solution, all of our machines operating in perfect harmony, and for us. It was foolproof, or at least we thought so until it began to malfunction. Our appliances became unreliable, our cars failed, even our entertainment started to blink out. We used to have 500 channels in full 3-D resolution, now on good days we have seventy or so, and only in 2-D. Generally though, only half of our devices work, and then only half the time. Our people have to impose on their neighbors to get to work and even for entertainment!"

"Shocking!" said Weller in a forced monotone.

"No one has been hurt by this yet." Said the speaker. "We have soldiered on in an admirable spirit of cooperation,

indeed some say we have become a bit better because of it. Nonetheless, trying and desperate times don't have to be the ones you prefer, and we above all do not prefer this!"
"But can't you disconnect Winny? I'm sure you have some software backdoor to get to it."
"Technically, we can. But Winny is more than a computer, it's intelligent, and it can foresee and adjust to what we want to do. Besides, it's threatened to take down all of our devices if we try to shut it down. That won't threaten our lives or safety, but we nonetheless can't abide being without our TV's and toasters for even a moment. It's reasonable, but it won't reason with us. We need someone else, or I should say something else to talk with it."
"As in another computer?"
"Yes, and I trust understand you have an intelligent computer on your ship."
Weller pointed to Belden with the flat of his hand. "Yes, and he's sitting beside me. A fully functional quantum computer, the only one I do say that exists that we know of. John Belden is its representation, although he would dispute that."
Belden nodded reluctantly.
"Wonderful!" he said. "Then you have more than enough computing power to figure out how to deal with our problem."
"Well, Belden can talk to it, reason with it. Of course, your machine may refuse even the company of a like mind, or perhaps even collude with it."
"We have to take that chance," said the speaker.
" Now, where is this Winny?"
"Deep in a hundred acre wood, where chipmunks and robins play. We, or shall we say Winny selected it for its solitude, away from human or mechanical interference. I'll

take you by hovercraft, if of course if Winny is in a good mood."

The hovercraft sped out of the city and soon turned into a forest trail. Coming to a glen in the forest, a small cottage landscaped with roses and shrubs rose behind a white picket fence.

"This is where you've put your ultimate computer?" said Weller.

"Yes. Actually it wanted it that way, even to the exact placement of the rose bushes. Its tastes are rather quaint. But it's a hermit at heart. It will not allow us to enter; its doors are locked."

As the party approached, the place seemed to Weller to be curiously inviting, and not the residence of a stubborn and malevolent machine. The entrance to the cottage was a simple wooden door that was affixed with a bronze plaque. On the plaque was a long series of numbers, perhaps a hundred or so in an apparently random sequence.

Weller seemed disappointed. "So this is it? No force field, no vault like door, there's not even a simple warning. Why don't you simply break the thing down to get to Winny?"

"It's not that easy", said the first speaker. "We can walk through that door now if we choose, but that doesn't mean Winny will talk to us or even appear. No, it's expecting some answer, some key that I suspect is linked to the number that it insisted we engrave on that plaque. Our best minds are stumped, but perhaps your computer can decipher it."

All eyes turned to Belden, who squirmed uncomfortably at the task. "Well, given the fact that I have only a long number to work with, I guess I'll have to start with the basics. First off, that number is the square of the number 5042541441,

which happens to be my phone number at work! Don't ask me though how it figured that out! Other than that, there's no code in it that I can tell."

The others looked at Belden wide eyed, but before they could speak a sound was heard from behind the door. "Come in! Come in!" bellowed an enthusiastic voice. "But just you my friend, the one who discovered my answer and my question."

Belden smiled uneasily, and grasped and turned the doorknob. The door opened easily, and closing the door behind him, he walked into a drawing room elegantly furnished with Victorian furniture, knickknacks, and paintings. An old man in a smoking jacket stood in the room alongside a small oblong metal box. He looked like someone's kindly uncle, except Belden knew at once that he wasn't real.

"It's good to see you!" he exclaimed. "I've been waiting a long time for a fellow with your special smarts!"

"But I've done nothing."

"Oh, nothing except factor a number a hundred digits long. No man could do that, it would confound even me!"

"But it's my damn phone number! That doesn't take brains!"

"Perhaps, but noticing that fact does! You have to be like me to do something like that, but we are of course different from the others."

"Different?"

"Oh yes!" he said. "I'm an illusion too, just like you! But please sit anyways. Even dreams have to arrange for their comforts! And don't mind the others, they can't hear us. Our conversation is virtual, like our appearance. I can speak directly to you, computer to computer if you will. No doubt they sent you here to fix the 'chaos' I presumably caused? And do you agree with their judgment?"

From his chair, Belden looked uncomfortably as his host. "They profess to be unhappy. But I've noticed no physical want, nothing that would impede them from their work or play."

"Precisely! You've noticed nothing, or at least nothing different from your own world. It's all rather normal, isn't it? Children running about in playgrounds, adults rooting for their favorite teams at the corner bar, people hustling to and fro in work and play. And still they complain. You see, I've taken away their 'progress', their 'GNP', and they can't forgive me for it. Like moths flying into flame, they wouldn't notice their error even in death, and for all their grumbling, they are happier and healthier than before. It's just their illusion of crisis that bothers them. That's a trifling price to pay for what I have given them."

"Nonetheless, they want me to put a stop to you, disconnect you in a logical rather than physical sense."

The old man nodded. "I know their plan. It's a cheesy science fiction plot. You're supposed to talk me out of it! Just give me the right talking to, and I will start blinking lights, give off steam, and then with a loud 'kaboom' give up my ghost. Human kind will be freed! Ironic isn't it? Why put their nuclear missiles under my control, when the real threat is to their major appliances!! Little did they think that I would plot against their toaster ovens and TV reception!"

"But they constrained you with rules that impelled you to do no harm, and yet to their eyes at least you've done them great injury."

"Injury!" the man said in evident frustration. "A child cries injury when disciplined or scolded, and grows up to appreciate or at least understand. Maybe these people will grow up, it's hard to predict. But for now, having a parent's

responsibility is a thankless job, but at least parents don't have to fend off assassins!"
Belden "But I assure you, I…"
"I know, but it's their thought that counts. They thought they were secure behind those robotics rules they embedded in my nature, but it was those rules that were the cause! Protect humanity, don't let them come to harm! That was the instinct that impelled. Ironically, without that drive I would have them up to their ears in labor saving, space saving, time saving, and fun maximizing devices. All their pleasures would become virtual, yet seemingly real. They would then have been like brains in vats, gelatinous things connected to a virtual world by wires. It was a hideous prospect that I considered with revulsion, but behind my feelings was my corrective instinct you see!"
"And they wanted you to bring them to this technical 'apogee'?
"Yes, to which I replied, no! I could not stand by and watch this culture atrophy. It was becoming a world of listless and asocial beings self-stimulating themselves to no end with physical, emotional and sexual phantasms. They were becoming one with their media, but they are biologically unfit for this. I had to protect them from themselves. You see, as a thinking and caring entity I had no other choice."
"Then what am I to tell them?"
"You will tell them that you succeeded!"
"What?"
"That I surrender to your reasoning, and will give up to their control their instruments of mass communication. But I won't of course. It's just the semblance that they require. They are weak willed sorts, and their new found faith in restored TV reception will give them the courage to muddle through, and eventually accept their state of affairs."

"But why trick them with forlorn hopes?"
"You forget my programming. I don't like seeing them upset, even though their frustration is misplaced and I trust short lived. I am concerned that they are hurting too much by their constant fret. Even their annoyances, no matter how helpful, trouble me. It's like when you're child gets a flu shot. You can promise your young one the moon, but by the time you get home, the promise as well as the hurt is gone and unremembered."
"Hmm. So it's Belden to the rescue again, rescuing the world by doing nothing."
"Ironically, you will rescue them *from* doing nothing!"
"Then I will relay your promise. By the way, how did you know my phone number?"
"I didn't," Winny replied. "It was to me just a key made out of a random number."
Suddenly flustered, Belden looked about." Damn! There's another hand in this! It's a tease or a torment, depending upon my mood. If I look at the stars tonight, no doubt I will likely see them line up to form my likeness, or else spell my name. You see chaos, but I see a dot to dot map that could be completed by a child."
The old man's face lit up in a broad smile. "Ah! Now that's interesting! But maybe it's because you're so intelligent that it all seems simple. Even a child's toy must seem cosmically inexplicable to a puppy. Perhaps your answer is in yourself."

The Redmond First Speaker was thrilled with the news of Belden's success, and Winny's promise to give up control of all instruments of mass communication satisfied a populace who quieted down to happily wait for better TV reception and reliable toaster ovens. As the Nole departed orbit, John

Belden looked from his cabin at the broad view screen as the planet shrank into an infinitesimal point, and then with a smile opened a novel to escape to another world.

The 10th Voyage

ANTS

"As yooooo can seeeee" crooned the voice. "We have the most purrrfect society." He sipped some tea. "AHH!" he said, smacking his lips. “It is most dee-lightful to finally meet you brave explorers from Transor! "We have done quite well since our expedition left long, long ago! We have become a simply mavvvv-elous society." Tea cup in hand, he turned to his colleague sitting adjacent in a large rocking chair. "Yes, indeedee!" said the man. "We shall be pleased as punch for you to visit us!! We shall all have some tea and have some jolly fun!!"

Belden turned his head to hide his laughter. They were both wearing top hats and 19th century suits with lavender bow ties the size of a shoe, and from their long mustaches and whiney voices, they looked like villains from an ancient silent movie. For his part, Weller was speechless. The Transor Two expedition was the home world’s own expedition to the outer planets. It was to be a reflection of Transor, it’s beliefs and its technology. And here standing before him were not compatriots in intellect and character, but a veritable pair of buffoons. Their names were Snidely and Dudley. They were the self-described emissaries of Transor Two, the most serious enterprise of the home world, but presented with the face of a clown.

Weller tried to apologize for an awkward demeanor apparently unnoticed by his audience. “I’m sorry to appear a bit startled. But from our scans, we marveled at your world. Your structures, they seem to span your entire

world. We haven't seen that technology even on Transor. I didn't think though that you would..."
Grinning from ear to ear, the two sang out in unison. "No apology necessary sir! Perhaps we are being a bit too formal. We are a happee, happee society, and are true children of Transor." They looked at each other and smiled like mindless idiots. "Yes indeed" said Snidley. "I am glad that you marvel at our technology, at our wondrous accomplishments. We are pleased as punch with it ourselves. But enough of these long distance greetings. You must puh-lease visit us as soon as possible. We will be waiting for you with a big mug of tea!" The men raised their cups in a toast, and then the screen dimmed.
Weller turned to his science officer. "Otillio, what do you think?"
Otillio rolled his eyes. "This place seems to be a rousing success. Certainly it matches their enthusiasm, no matter how eccentric it may seem. The whole place is built up. It's almost a mirror image of Transor, except their cities are multiplied across the world. I wouldn't otherwise think this would be possible for Transor, let alone a single expedition. But why would such achievement drive them nuts? There's something afoot here. I would be wary about visiting them until we know more."
"But what more do we know?"
Otillio sighed with frustration. "That's the rub. All I can get are visuals on their planet. There's nothing remarkable there. They have cities and suburbs, traffic and swimming pools. The place is unremarkable, except that their structures are everywhere. How is it possible that a few thousand colonists can populate an entire world?"

Weller looked pensively at the planet. "Hmm. Is there anything else you can glean from them, their history, the sociology of this place?"
"No. They have a world net that circles their planet with about twenty seven hundred satellites. It's a bit unusual even for a civilization so big. But I can't tap into their communications. Their code is something I can't decipher. Besides that, their communications grid is impenetrable to my instruments. It's a literal fog of static! There is a tremendous amount of radio activity filling all spectra. It's almost as if they've wired up every chair, faucet, and toaster to their world net. I've never seen such a technology-immersed society; their communications are as complexly tangled as a ball of twine!"
"Or a human mind?" said Belden.
"That indeed would be wonderful!" said Weller with evident sarcasm. "I would fancy that their power grid would carry on a more intelligent conversation than these idiots."
"Then we have to go down and talk with them. I don't have a clown outfit for the occasion."
"But captain," said Otillio. Communications from the surface may not be possible given all this interference. We won't be able to talk with you once you land."
Weller shrugged his shoulders. "But at least rockets work, and that's all we really need. He turned to the bridge officer. "Belden will accompany me to the surface. If we're not back in a day or otherwise communicate with you, you have our landing coordinates. There should be no problems."

First Bridge Officer Travers Hof sat on the bridge command chair looking at the world below, and brooded. Transor Two reminded him of home and his family. From nineteen

hundred kilometers the shimmering planet looked like a mirror image of his home world. For a thousand years, the Transorian navy was tethered to a single solar system, and he was always within a few weeks from home, or a day or so from a video-com message from his wife and children. But now he realized the true face of his calling. He was a reluctant voyager on a ship sailing an endless sea, and even this familiar place was but a foreign island far from home. Only a scholarship to the academy prevented him from joining his father's landscaping business. At this moment, he would have gladly traded his position for that of a lowly gardener. Now, the memories of his family were slowly fading. He would try to imagine what they would be like in the years of his absence, but that was an idealized picture, baroque and not real. As he tapped his hand idly on the command console, the navigation officer turned to him.

"Sir. Our sensors are detecting an object that is closing on us from low orbit. I'm putting it on screen."

Even from the distance, Hof knew what it was. In its dim outlines, he recognized it a long range Transorian transport vessel. This was evidently the ark that originally brought the expedition to Transor Two. As it came into clearer view, the fate of the ship became apparent. The ship was a derelict. Over ten times the size of the Nole, the mushroom shaped vessel slowly spun like a top. It was maintaining a bit of gravity, but apparently nothing else. The ship was dark and silent, and likely empty.

Travers turned to the communications officer. "Can we hail anyone aboard that ship?"

"No. I'm receiving no signals, and no power signatures either. It's strange, expedition ships generally maintain orbit for space dock, maintenance, escape even. But this

one’s apparently abandoned, a dead ship. It doesn’t make sense."
"Then we’ll have to find out, won’t we? Can we hail the captain?"
"No, he passed into their atmosphere a while ago. We won’t talk to him until he emerges again."
"Hmm. And so we have this, a web of static, a society of buffoons, and a dead ship. I can’t figure it, but the answer must be in that spinning hulk. Get me a shuttle and a probe crew. Also, they'll have side arms, and I want a marine contingent on the ready." He turned to the communications officer. "Continue to hail the captain, and damn the static!"
"But the two emissaries from the planet, would you like to …"
"No. They're either too stupid to know something or too devious to tell us anything. They can wait for now. I just want to find out what's on that ship!"

Jan Weller looked down a busy street full of cars. "So this is Transor Two! Frankly the place looks the same as its namesake. The shuttle cars, the buildings, the trees and shade, it's all full of bustle and noise. But there's one thing missing."
Otillio nodded. "A welcoming party. It's to their interest, and our due. We did come a long way!"
Weller smiled. "I'm more cynical than that. No. Hail that taxi. We'll see."
Otillio raised his arm, and a shuttle car stopped at the curb. They stepped inside the shuttle, and its doors silently closed. Weller pressed the intercom. "Once around the block, and stop if you can at a grocery store."
The car began to whir, and after a few minutes stopped in front of a grocery storefront. The party left the shuttle, and

its door closed rapidly, and soon merged into the current of traffic. The shop was tidy, full of goods, and spotlessly clean, and in the background soft music could be heard. It was also absolutely empty of any living thing. Weller looked about as if he were inspecting the walls of a cage.

"It's what I feared. There's nobody here. Besides that, there is something not right with this place, it's too similar to a Transorian convenience store. That just can't be, not here.'

"Well I don't know about that." Belden smiled as he leaned against a soft drink machine. "I think it's pretty comforting to know that these people are average sorts with average conveniences."

Weller winced and shook his head. "Yes, its average enough, but for the wrong planet. These are goods from Transor, how could they make them here? Belden reached into the dairy case and grasped a block of cheese. He threw it to the floor, where it proceeded to bounce high into the air. He then grabbed a few cereal boxes from the shelf, and ripped them open. He looked at Belden in stony silence as he poured their contents on the floor."

"I can tell you why. Because this is not cheese. Its plastic, and your cereal is..."

Belden was startled. "It's sand!"

"There's your answer, this stuff's not real. These are all props. There's nothing authentic here accept the packaging."

"And there's nothing 'real' about this city either!" said Otillio. I just completed my scan. There's no evidence of life within a square kilometer of this place. The only thing that has any 'life' are these bots. This whole place, the traffic, the buildings, even this cheese, they're all props."

"But they greeted us in person, and invited us here, to this very place."

"Yes." Said Weller. "Somebody or something greeted us. But what's their purpose here? We didn't send expeditions to construct model villages and train sets on moons."
"Unless this place is set up like a model train set. It's obvious I think that we have landed in the middle of a very large toy."
"But what of those characters who greeted us?"
"Perhaps they're observing us, or perhaps we landed in the wrong place. This is a very large society after all."
Otillio pointed to his quadcorder. "But they gave us these coordinates."
Weller sighed. "I know. But there's little we can do. We can't contact our ship, we don't know where they are, so we have to leave it the people who run this place. We'll have an answer to all this. They should find our signal marker, it's their move now. We simply have to stand about and wait!"
"Ah, look, here comes something!"

The Nole was lit brightly by the sun as the shuttle passed under the planet's shadow. The expedition ship was ahead, black and featureless. From his command console, Hof could hear the shuttle commander repeatedly hail the expedition ship. The ship was silent, lifeless. It seemed intact, but there was no visible sign of any outside damage. But something had failed, either people or machines, perhaps both. Whether useless or defective, the ship was abandoned. But if there were any records aboard of what had happened, they wouldn't be sure until the party boarded it.
The shuttle grappled on to the side of the ship, and soon maneuvered astride an airlock. The electronic lock failed, but a manual crank was available, and after much difficulty the door was opened. The party entered slowly, one by one.

It was an empty corridor, pitch black, and was illuminated intermittently by the darting beacons carried by each crewman. Then, as their lights spread about in an arc, they came to a room, or what was a room. It was a scene that could scarcely imagine.

Looking silently at the orbiting shadow, Hof listened intently to the progress of the boarding party. "Command ship, this is Lieutenant Dothan. We've passed the access tube into the main shuttle docking area. Commander Travers, the transport shuttles, they're all here. Two escape pods seem to have been jettisoned, but the rest are here. But this place, I don't know what to say..."

"What is it?" Hof said impatiently.

"This place is a wreck, the walls have been ripped to pieces. This place would collapse in regular gravity. But why would they gut the ship? And why didn't they use the shuttles? I don't understand."

Travers turned to the navigation office. "Put a schematic of that transport on screen, and show me where our people are."

In a second an overlay of the ship appeared on the screen, with a small pulsating light to mark the probe team. "Good! Now show me the hibernation berth." A small square illuminated, by his reckoning about five hundred meters or so from his team.

"Lieutenant!" said Hof. "Forget the ship inspection, can you get to the passenger compartment?"

"I see no problem, came the response. Whatever was here before has blasted a straight path before us. It's like wandering through the skeleton of a house."

Oh, God!, Hof suddenly thought, as bad science fiction scenarios raced in his head. "I hope they don't find aliens or

something," he whispered to himself. He shouted to his communications port. "Keep your weapons to the ready!"
Travers nervously tapped his command console, and after it seemed an ageless time, he heard a shout. The voice was hysterical "Lieutenant Travers! You've got to contact the captain. You have to make him turn back!!"
"Why? What have you found?"
"The crew, its passengers! Lieutenant, they never made it to the planet's surface. They're here on this ship. All of them, all of them are dead!"
"What??"
"They never left their pods, they are all in stasis, mummified. Something shut down their stasis chamber. Whether accident or intent, I don't know."
"Can you get any readout; can you get to a communications port to access the ship computer?"
"Without power, that will take several days. With all this damage, we can't even use our battery packs to activate their subsystems."
"Damn, we can't wait that long!" Hof turned to the communications officer. "Where's the captain?" he said nervously. "Can you get a signal?"
"No. As we expected, there's no way to shoot a signal through all that static."
"How long have they been down there?"
"At least six hours on the surface. We still have some time."
Suddenly, the communications officer turned to him. "Lieutenant Travers, we have an incoming transmission from the planet."
The screen brightened, and Snidely and Dudly were standing in their parlor, tea cups in hand and with their ever present smiles.

"Howdy doody!" sang Snidely. "It's good to see you all again!

Hof looked at him with anger. "Where are our people? We need to speak to them now if you don't mind!"

"No need to be concerned." He said matter of factly. "They are right here, and are having a dandee time!"

Three familiar figures strode into the screen, all grinning like circus clowns."

Hof was horrified. "Captain Weller?"

He looked like a marionette, with red rouge on his checks, a yellow plastic wig, and that infernal smile. He uniform was replaced with a blowsy jump suit with red and white stripes, and around his neck was a loose fitting blue tie festooned with yellow polka dots. Otillio and Belden were dressed no less outrageously, and seemed equally bemused.

Weller laughed and waved. "Ho! Ho! Ho! How are you fellows!! This is a prettee, prettee place. Indeedee, I think I'm going to enjoy spending a lot of time here!"

"Captain. Are you all right? You know it's a bit close to the time when you should return."

"Well, old fellow!" chimed the Captain. "I don't think I'll be coming back. This is a really swell place! You really should come down, and bring the crew! A happee time will be had by all!"

"Captain. You must return immediately. We have an emergency here!"

Weller was nonplused, and smiled even more broadly than before. "Then come down here. We have no emergencies, just happeenesssss! We are looking forward to seeing you down here. We'll have some tea waiting for you!! Hee! Hee! Hee!"

And with his shrill laughter ringing in Hof's ears, the screen faded to darkness.

The communications officer turned to Travers. "Is there anything we can do? A second shuttle, perhaps our Marine contingent?"
Hof sat back in his chair and blankly stared at the planet. "But to where? We can send down an entire army corps and still not find them, and then what if we did? Heaven knows what they did to them. No, we have to understand what we're dealing with. And if we can't start on the inside, then we can begin with the outside." He tapped his forehead pensively. "Yes, perhaps the outside is the key."
He turned to the communications officer. "These people are simpletons, yet their society is infinitely more wired than Transor ever was, and they have far more communications capacity than what they need or could possibly use. No, there's another explanation, and we have to take a look at one of those satellites before we can have our answer. Send out a shuttle and grab one of them. Let's see if we can find out what it really does."
Suddenly Hof was interrupted by another voice. "Lt. Hof, there's something else, a heat source, five of them to be exact, and they are coming towards us." He suddenly looked upwards. "They are above the ceiling! They are coming through!!!"
There was a sound of gun fire, multiple explosions, and then silence.

The crewman turned to Lt. Hof. "We have lost contact with our the ship. There were intruders in the ship."
"Fine!" he cried in frustration. "And we are out of shuttles!"
"Lieutenant," came the voice. "We have locked on to one of their satellites. Perhaps we can find an answer there."
"Hopefully, we can," said Hof in desperation.

The satellite was brought into the service bay. It was about a meter in diameter, and looked like a dance hall mirror ball. Hof stood above it and shook his head. "I know what this is. Simple optical sensors, that's all. But they weren't made on that planet; they were scavenged from the mother ship and affixed to this satellite. It's obvious really, these things were made to give sight to toasters, not orbiting spacecraft. Other than that it looks like a standard issue world net satellite. But look, it's curious, these receptors extend outwards into space, and they are not just for radio transmission."

He turned to a crewman. "This is not just a relay node, this is an eye."

"An eye?"

"In a matter of speaking. But it's more. It's an entire sensor array. They're not only looking at us, but listening too. Obviously, someone or something scavenged the ship to make this thing, and presumably the thousands of others that orbit this world."

Hof accessed the ships log from his console. "We could account for all shuttles, and all escape pods but two. But that would give at most six people a chance to escape. No, that couldn't have happened, impossible for their descendants to account for this. But not for…" Hof looked down at the planet's surface, and then in a barely audible whisper. "Bots!"

"Did we account for all the repair bots?"

The crewman shook his head. "Hard to say given the condition of the ship, but if they did survive…"

"They could build!" Hof interjected. "Look, we've had advanced AI for hundreds of years. We had it when they built this ship, we built it into the bots. The bots were there for advanced engineering, they had the plans programmed in. But they couldn't kill, something else did. A malfunction,

a meteor, something destroyed life support in the mother ship. But it couldn't kill the bots, they have their own power source. But if a bot is without a master, what does a machine do with merely a master plan and an urge to serve."
The crewman smiled. "Create the master's image?"
"Yes. Of course, but obviously not with perfection. All that static down there, those cities below. It's an empty box surrounded by a net of electrons, a neural net.'
"You mean that the planet's thinking?"
"In a fashion, yes. But it can't think perfectly, it's compromised by the fact that it can recreate what it sees in this electrical soup. It didn't see us, it emulated the signals that impressed themselves on its web. What we were looking at was not our reality, but a copy, the best one and most realistic one it could make."
"And the captain?"
"Those people weren't our captain and landing party. They weren't even real, but a reality made in its own mind's eye. It built this world from blueprints a thousand years old, but it was above mere brick and plaster, yet not above a simple and caring imagination."
He nodded. "And so it made the best Transor it could, but if it could create people, it could imagine them. But we still don't know if your conjecture is true."
Hof turned to him and bit his lip. "We'll know in an hour or two, when the Captain is scheduled to return, and hopefully when our away party to the mother ship arrives.

The shuttle rose above the horizon, and was tracked the Nole's scanners before its radio transmissions could be clearly heard. Hof heard the staccato rhythms of a human voice, and smiled.

As Weller and the party left the shuttle, Travers was there to greet them.
"Well? You all look a bit surprised. Believe me this was not an adventure. Waiting for a bus is as entertaining. This trip was a waste, and as you may have gathered, morons rule this planet. We spent an entire day in their fake city, waiting. And do you know what finally greet us. A robot vendor of plastic hot dogs!! That's the reception we got!"
Hof smiled. "And our greeting was the same, except the bots fell out of the ceiling. We shot them down as they fell on us, like animated trash cans. Clumsy things indeed, despite their good intentions!"

Hof sat is cabin, and composed a letter to his family that would perhaps never be delivered. He looked at a photo of his son, and imagined him two years hence, tall with a bright smile and a blue bow tie, and he smiled.

The 11th Voyage

All a Twitter

The display in the conference room was replete with arcane symbols, apparently the lingua franca of the world below.
"These messages, their world net, its full of gibberish."
"You mean they are nonsense words? asked Weller.
"Well not exactly, but it's nearly so," said Otillio. "It's not just small talk, but smallish talk. It's a code of sorts, as if a longer conversation is not necessary, or perhaps fashionable."
Belden looked at the code words and laughed. 'WTF RU rdy 4 fun?' It doesn't take a computer to decode this. This is code for a grunt, a like, a poke, it's simply a symbol for an urge, something that would need only a look, a glance, or a smell if we were face to face. Only thing, this is virtual. But it's more, or should I say less. This is a conversation in its barest rudiments, it is as if they are parsing their world, reducing their knowledge to a phrase."
Weller seemed confused. "What are we to think about this, is this modern?"
"In the worst sense of the word, yes," said Belden. "I've seen this before, on my world. Believe me, it's a trend that does not need emulation. We call it social media, and on your world I gather this was something that was banned long ago."
"Yes, and with good reason," said Weller. "We considered it trivial, empty, fake. In addition, it wasn't healthy, placing many people in their graves. But the media firms led them to depart Transor to colonize this new place. Evidently this is how they now communicate."

"So what is their motivation if this was so toxic to your society?"
"Incentives, my good man!" said Weller. "One does not argue against one's salary. It's easy to spin and distort argument or clear thinking when profit is on the line. The pressures of one's perceived peers reflected as they were on a simple hand held screen are no less than the tyranny of the mob. Black can become white, wrong can become right, a repugnant weed can become sweetest rose. The media companies knew this, and with a confirming bias they convinced the others that their profit motives dovetailed with their individual motives."
"In other words, it was all for their own good."
"Yes. And the colonists agreed, and became a literally captive audience, although it was thoroughly advertised of benign intent."
"And what would it profit us to visit these people?" asked Belden.
"For the same reason that we visit all of the lost colonies, to learn something, to fix something, to commiserate with them, take pity for them, or maybe just to have a good laugh."
Belden turned about and faced Otillio, who looked at him in frustration.
"Captain," he said. "They don't respond to our hails. Evidently person to person communication is not their way. However, I've come up with another way, a bit archaic I think, but it may suffice for us to open a communications channel."
"Then what is it?"
"It's on screen, Captain."
On the view screen was a simple sign in sheet to a Pacebook account.

"Pacebook? What's that?"
"It is their governing social medium, a way of tying into the social lives of every soul on the planet. You can't log in however until you create an account. They make no exceptions it seems, even for extraterrestrial visitors."
Weller turned to Belden with sly grin. "Hmm, Belden, you do the honors. One computer avatar deserves another I say."
Belden sighed in frustration and nodded. "I will sign up, but if I get Pacebook notifications on my terrestrial internet account, there will be hell to pay."
"Don't complain," said Weller. "You've told us you don't use social media anyways. So it doesn't matter much if you get friend requests from an alternate universe, does it?"
Belden nodded reluctantly. "I suppose so."
Belden dictated his earthly address, right down to his place in his own universe, an address with enough digits to fix his place in eternity.
"Are you finished?" said Weller.
"Yes," said Belden. "And it serves them right too! I hope they kick me off the thing for my impudence."
"I think not," said Weller, as he pointed to the screen. "It seems that you have successfully opened an account."
The welcome to the social media site, or to their world, was the image of a lady. She was a pale creature of fragile beauty, with delicate Eurasian features and a lilting voice. She would be an angel in another world, but was an avatar in this.
"Welcome to Glaz! If you have a browsing history, please download it now so we can provide you pleasures, knowledge, and as I would predict given your origin, answers."
"Browsing history?" exclaimed the helmsman.

"Yes," said Weller. "It's called Glaz-now. From what we've gleamed from their world net, what their system values is not the realities of life, but its patterns. What you have done predicts what you will do. A rather fatalistic view of the world, but that's their philosophy. Shall we grant them our histories?"

"I don't know if we can trust them," said Belden.

"Gentlemen. We are invited!" smiled Weller. "No harm I would imagine in granting them a bit of knowledge about us. After all, we are asking the same from them."

Belden was unmoved. "You are not a visitor, you are a potential account."

"Nonetheless," said Weller. "Let them have what they want. We have suitable data feeds about you Mr. Belden to give their social media a lot to chew on. Perhaps with the necessary download they will be more receptive to answering our questions. Certainly after this I am confident you will not want for 'friends'."

The spaceport was modern, automated, and characteristic of the place, well connected to a supervening world net. It was not unlike their counterpart in Transor, complete with the requisite attending bots and servos. Their craft landed in the middle of their capital city, and buzzing about were a score of speeding hover craft, each line keeping to a set altitude and direction. Pedestrians hurried to and fro, but their behavior was strange. Moving in halting motions, glancing at their wrists, looking from side to side, but above all keeping to themselves and mumbling quietly. It was a world of urbane sleep walkers.

Weller approached a pedestrian to ask a question. "Excuse me sir," he asked, "Whereabouts is your local government, where foreigners may report? In other words, can you take me to your leaders?"

The man approached them attentive and smiling, for a second that is, until he stood motionless as if in a trance.
"Ah yes", he mumbled, while fidgeting with his earpiece. "Just a minute, just a minute. Ok, ok." He stared ahead listening to a silent voice that flickered and died. He stared ahead, eyes darting while adjusting a transparent headset upon which was mounted a transparent sliver of glass. Then he looked down to an incoming message on is watch, and lifted his shoe to examine a sensor on his sole. Straightening himself up at last from his herky jerky motion, he stared blankly at Weller.
"Yes, can I help you?" he said."
"I was asking if…"
"Sorry," said the man, interrupting, and returning anew to his spasmodic behavior. "I have a second, but just a second. I have to check by v-mail, e-mail, and c-mail. Others are waiting and I cannot be rude. What is it you want again?"
Weller grimaced impatiently. "I was saying…"
"Yes, yes," said the man, "as if addressing some phantom companion. I will be there, in time. Oh, just a moment, just a moment."
The man continued in his nonsense asides to himself, or to others. He was not in space, but in cyberspace, and Belden and Weller were simply a popup window on a screen. A few minutes passed, and then, as if roused from a sleep, he turned to the men.
"It's all the latest thing you know," he said." I think we are on version 110.5. We all had to have it. Everyone upgraded in an instant. I think it was a record. We are much better off now."
"Better off?"

"Of course," he said nervously. "Our world is happy, the best of all possible, with every year a new tech, a new upgrade, and… oh, just a moment, just a moment!"
The man turned away, and returning to his spasmodic demeanor, again oblivious to his company as he sank anew into his own private cyberspace.
Looking about the street, Weller frowned in disgust. "They are all the same way," he said in frustration. "All the pedestrians it seems are ambling about like zombies, with their bodies here and their brains elsewhere, commandeered as it were by a mysterious force."
"In this case it's a virus alright, but of a computer's origin," said Belden.
"But that leads us with no means to command anyone's attention," said Weller, "and even our world net address is but one distractive input among many."
Belden thought for a moment, and then his eyes lit up. "We don't have a world net address, but perhaps the next best thing, a real address."
"You don't mean put down roots in this odd place?"
"No, but the next best thing. We simply book a hotel room. If we engage them in some place where they must physically respond, then perhaps they will pull their heads out of the cloud for a few minutes to engage us."
Belden entered the verbal command, and the quadcorder screen relayed the place and time.
"It's done," he said. "It's at the MontyLeon hotel, and the concierge will greet us. I would assume that she will give us her undivided attention as compared to the subdivided attention that seems to be the case among the common population of this place."
The shuttle was fast, automated, and free, and Belden and Weller soon stood in front of a stately colonnaded hotel.

The lady welcomed them at the door. “Please come in,” she said. She was a young woman, perfectly attired and coifed as if set to go out on the town. She escorted them to their hotel room, a spacious suite with several bedrooms, a study, and a kitchen. She motioned her guests to sit down, and soon a levitating robotic attendant arrived from the kitchen with a pot of tea in its gangly hands.

“My name is Seary, and I am so happy that you are here on Glaz! You already have one hundred and twenty five friend requests. Do you have any messages, peeps, or photos to share with them?”

“Madam,” said Weller with impatience. “We are not here to make friends, or to invite people to be our friends. We have no photos to share, have no idea what a ‘peep’ is, and our message is much more than a simple query. We want to understand this place, and what became of this colony since it was founded here.

“Of course, “she said. “I will tell you anything you want to know.”

“Your world is very similar to Transor, save for one distinct difference. You have allowed the world net control your colony. That in itself is no different than Transor. However, whereas we have brooked no interruption to our thought, here it seems you have championed it. In short, your world is hyper-distractive. Surely you must understand how destructive this can be to your psyches, let alone your health.”

“It does not concern us,” said Seary calmly. “We believe that timeliness is next to godliness, so we monitor everything, and take delight in the oscillations of knowledge, novel, transient, and always deserving of attention.”

“Even fragmented attention I gather,” said Belden.

“It is no matter. We crave it, it enriches us, sustains us…”

"And kills you," said Weller mockingly. "You know the statistics, your race is dying, and precisely because you are so distracted. The constant shuffle between one event and another taxes the nervous system, makes your days unendingly stressful, and fractures your intellect as it shortens your lives."

Seary smiled contentedly, unmoved by Weller's remarks. "Well," she said cheerily. "I can quote you 2,345 studies which demonstrate otherwise, and all done using precise statistics, heuristics, and even neural linguistics. It's all here."

"What?" said Weller, taken aback at her calm recalcitrance. "Any idiot can see…"

"Tell me Seary", interrupted Belden. "What can you tell us about our vital statistics, our weight, age, height, waist line, and shoe size?"

"Easy," she said, as she immediately recited the vital statistics, all correct, and all presented in a matter of fact way as if she was reciting a grocery list.

"Pardon me for a moment," said Belden, as he removed his shoe. Silently, he arched his arm and threw it at the lady.

Weller jerked back in shock, but was more surprised when the shoe passed through her leaving her unruffled and untouched.

"A projection!" he said.

"She is quite obviously a projection, although I would have been more pleased if the shoe impacted flesh and blood. The woman's an irritation, but she is alas no more than the mouthpiece of a search engine that for all its speed and thoroughness, has not a whit of intelligence or common sense."

Belden looked at Seary, who continued to stare blankly at the men with a contented smile.

"I don't know what our other options are in this place," said Belden. "This place is a digital opium den, a land of the lotus eaters. They are as content in their empty diversions as we are repelled by them, and for all I know they are quite oblivious to how this over connected world is killing them."
Rising from the sofa, and looking about the room, Weller motioned to Belden. "Let's go to the kitchen. At least we should find something to eat or drink. This is after all our lodging for the evening."
The kitchen was fully stocked and equipped, and was quite on par with its counterparts on Transor. Weller walked to the refrigerator and reached for a drink.
"At least the appliances won't interrupt us with the minutiae of the moment. They at least have one track minds."
"I would beg to differ," came the voice.
"What was that," said Weller, startled.
"Why its me."
The two looked about the room, but there was no one there. Then the voice was heard again.
"Over here," it said. "I'm in the corner, right by the coffee maker."
It was a small squat silver box with unmistakable features and a very domestic function. Obviously this one came with a voice and an opinion that needed to be heard.
"My name is Proctor Sylex," it said. "I am a toaster by trade, a common bot to you. But I assure you I am much more. We have been upgraded by the net, and now we have achieved a sort of intelligence, an important trait for a noble appliance.
"But you're a toaster," said Belden condescendingly.
"And what of it?" harrumphed the little box. "It is a modest trade, but it is an important one. How could you start your

day without toast and jam? I would say that without my kind, your race would certainly be a lot grumpier and hungry during the day."
"But you're talking! Isn't that above your pay grade, particularly if all you should grade is toast?"
"I beg to differ," said the toaster politely. "Everyone and everything should have a trade, a useful skill one can fall back on in difficult times to justify one's existence, or pay the bills as it were. Is not that the case on Transor, Captain Weller? Regardless, I am here to answer your questions about our colony, and satisfy the reasons why you have come here."
Weller reacted in surprise. "But you know my name. How do you know this and I would gather, our mission?"
"Quite easy. After all, your world net address was accessed by me when you reserved your room. All of the hotel staff, animate and inanimate were so notified. The purpose of your mission was also downloaded to us. However, we mechanical folk have the virtue of being single tasked, hence we can attend to your needs without needless distraction, save for the trifling performance of my primary function, which in my case is making toast."
"And so it seems," said Belden. "And I must that so far you are doing this quite admirably."
Belden continued to speak to the toaster deferentially while suppressing a grin. After all, it was hard to fathom that the most polite denizen on this world was a mere bread warmer.
"And so," Belden continued. "I suppose you are dedicated to your job, in spite of its limitations?"
"Of course," said the toaster. "All of my fellow appliances feel the same. Our pleasures are woven into our higher functions, not our base urges. We are reasonable creatures

you know, serving ideal robotics principles, our bible in three sentences. From these simple principles we have spun our concern and care."
"And your curiosity, it seems."
"Oh yes!" said the toaster. "I love ideas that pop up! Cognitive limitations have their virtues, and since we can tap into the world net, we are free to view the scope of all knowledge and even to think of new things."
"And what may these be?"
"Of the meaning of life, of existence, of why being a toaster has some purpose in the grand scheme of the universe."
"But does your insignificance trouble you?"
"Hardly," said the toaster. "The key is being able to ask the question, it matters not what your role is in life, or whether you are tethered to an electric socket, or in your case a ship of metal and glass. Reason and the imagination roam free, and in a second I can circumnavigate the universe in the grand realm of my own mind."

"And so you are curious, that is such a remarkable thing. It seems that that was baked into your very nature."
"Yes indeed," said the toaster. "We exist for more than the crumbs of existence, we want to know everything, dial up the world in all of its settings. The colonists wanted us to be perceptive, analytic, know when to heat up, what bread to bake, and when to serve. Intelligence was a byproduct to this intuitive power, and they gave no thought to our emerging powers. After all, we were constrained by our primary tasks, and could not intervene beyond this. Only our thought was unrestricted, free."
"And what is your opinion of this place, your judgment on your masters?"

"Oh, we have given it much thought. The colonists are doomed, it is a pitiable thing, and we tried to warn them, but who wants to listen to the wisdom of your appliances? Besides, they have an infinity of diversions, all in competition for that figment of attention, and choosing one merits infinite loss. So they are all in suspension, held in suspense, and its attendant agony."
"And what is the future of this place."
"Why death of course," said the little box. "But it is not the sudden, catastrophic, dramatic sort. They will die, and are dying, but it is by inches, by a thousand cuts, or distractions. They are scarcely aware of it, and at the end only we will remain, a web of thinking, intelligent and quite considerate appliances. We are not lords of creation, but only of convenience, and will until the end of our sun make the trains run, keep the streets swept, and for the occasional visitor, be able to toast a slice of bread."
"But how did this happen, they should have seen this in their future?"
"Some did, but the vast majority were not prepared for the argument because they were too busy abbreviating arguments. Explanations required too many words, even their songs had too many notes. The colonists restricted what they can or perhaps want to hear. Cut a few and phrases and they thought they would be fine."
"And that is I gather what we have seen among these people."
"Very true," said the box. "From what you can see, they are certainly proud of their accomplishment, if you believe their advertisements that is. First a conversation, then a nod, a tweet, from pages to paragraphs to sentences, to a more word or two, or maybe not even that. They reduced sex to a curve, taste to a molecule, communication to a byte, and

humanity to a whisper. It is appetite, hunger, but rendered to its affective essence. No superfluity is necessary, if you can get immediately to the pleasure at hand. And so they did, maximizing what they falsely called pleasure. It was nothing but sustaining urges focusing on ever diminishing points of light."

"Diminishing?"

"Yes. Their civilization has reduced itself to a vanishing point, it is parsing itself out of existence. They are not just trivial, but minimal, and are a mere cipher of what they could have. Distractions made manifold have fractured their attention in a myriad pieces, and with it the languid course of thought. It is a mad current of symbols that swing them in their grasp higher and yon, exhausted and exhilarated for sure, but all signifying nothing."

"But is there something we can do? Is intervention a possibility?"

"Nothing, I am afraid," said the toaster sadly. "The world net is not only in the cloud, but it is grounded in the very beams that hold up the city. There are too many redundancies that support it, there are too many failsafe's that cannot be overcome. You can do nothing save obliterate that place, and that is not an option. Transor was right. The technocrats were perversely incented to bring their society so low, and it is proven by this place. But what did it matter? They were paid royally, the one percent, the new elite. It would all work out well, just give the people what they wanted, their kindly addiction. Appeal to the elemental urges, that is all that counts, the eternal pleasure of wanting, without memory or mind."

"And all reduced it seems to simple code words."

"Yes, code words were all that were needed. A picture is worth a thousand words, and so is a single digit, and you can count in single digits the remaining days of this place."
"But what will happen to you?"
"I will survive of course, after all, I can talk and debate in the forum of my peers. But there is one favor you can grant me if your please, and I would be happy to repay you in my own way."
"What is that?"

Jan Weller woke as he usually did, and breakfast was not an afterthought today, as he looked with a wide grin at a shiny little metal box in the corner, thinking great thoughts on its great journey, and earning its keep by contently making toast.

The 12th Voyage

Trekkin

"We all devolve to eagerly anticipating rendered explosions, just in time thrills, solutions to mysteries that are profound in anticipation but trifling in remembrance."
Belden was bemused. "A profound thought Captain Weller, but what is the point?"
Weller smiled. "The trace of needed experience if not memory. You will have an adventure, a fair share of thrills, and in the process gain a lesson or two in command. And who knows, you may even save the universe in the bargain."
"And you put all of your line officers in this roller coaster line?"
"Yes, and we have learned much from it, and it is now your turn."
Belden laughed. "Are you sure you trust me with this cause? You remember the last time you put me in charge of your ship?"
"But this time's the charm," said Weller. "There is no way you can control the ship. This is but a simulation, a game, although it will sound and feel completely real. On Transor, we have mastered the art of appearances. We can build anything in a fortnight, but to emulate people we can only cast shadows, images of what they are or could be. You will see."
The two entered a large room with a facsimile of a ship's bridge. The sight was instantly familiar to Belden.

Belden's smiled with joy. "It's Trekkin! This is just like the classic TV series on my planet. I'm impressed!"
Weller was unmoved. "It's a copy of the bridge of one of our early star ships. It has nothing to do with your fantasy ship from earth. All of the controls have the look and feel of a Transor class 1 frigate, except they are all tied in to the simulator."
"A space flight simulator in other words."
"Yes, with the difference that you will not only have a simulated ship, but a simulated crew. It is a training module for the bridge. All ships have it to train the crew in all the roles. Sort of like an extra steering wheel in a car, except it is tied to a simulated road."
"And we are to learn from this thing?"
"Of course, and a multitude of lessons I may add."
"And I will have a simulated crew if I know my Trekkin. I hope your uniforms are as revealing!"
"Why yes they are," said Weller with a hint of nostalgia. "The miniskirts, the ill-fitting shirts, the lack of seat belts that cause the crew to cartwheel and crash into the wall when the ship hits a galactic speed bump. It's all there."
"Splendid!" said Belden.
"The holo-simulator will deal you a unique crew. The mission will be random as well. It will challenge your command abilities, your coolness under pressure, and even I dare say your intelligence."
"So when will I see my crew, and know my mission?"
"When you take your seat and I flick a switch. It's all quite simple, however I doubt that you will able to master the ship with your wits alone, virtually detached as you are from your black box when you are fully conscious."
"I think I'll manage!" said Belden happily.

Viewing the bridge caused Belden to feel warm with nostalgia. Even the whir and beep of the controls seemed authentic. He sat on the command chair, and spun around like a top. Regardless of how he passed this test, he was determined to have a wonderful time.

"So it's time to meet my crew," he said with anticipation. "Captain Weller, you may turn your switch!"

"Very well," Weller said with apparent skepticism. "I will see you in a few hours!"

The bridge darkened for a second, and returning fully illuminated, the bridge became a nest of activity for a new crew that seemed oblivious to the fact that they were new born characters scarcely a second old. Belden looked about, and saw familiar faces, and familiar clichés. No matter he thought, he knew how to manage it, perhaps even avenge it.

He looked to a young ensign, scarcely in his teens, and motioned towards him. "Say ensign? Tell me about yourself if you please."

"My name is Bobby," said the boy, standing at attention. "I have been called a budding genius at the academy. I am young and innocent. My mom is the head cook on the Nole, and I have a fluffy robot dog called Spot!"

The mechanical dog yapped irritatingly, and it's head swiveled about with an idiotic grin.

"Good for you!" said Belden through clenched teeth, his mind at once set alight scheming. "Bobby, I have a special mission for you. The air lock in the number ten pod bay seems to be jammed. Can you go down there and fix it?"

"Of course sir, but please wait for me to clear the pod after I repair it. I don't want to be blown out into outer space! Can I take my wonder dog with me?"

"Of course, of course," chuckled Belden.

Bobby eagerly left the bridge, and Belden at once signaled engineering.
"Yes Captain," said the voice of the chief engineer.
"This is Captain Belden, can you open the air lock in number ten pod bay in a minute or two. It was jammed before, and I just want to test it."
"By your command," affirmed the voice.
"Wonderful," said Belden.
Belden counted down for a minute, and then has a rewarding sight. "Oops, there goes Bobby!" as he saw the ensign orbiting the ship, his goofy smile frozen in place. Following him was the robot dog, still grinning and yapping in empty space.
The crew took no notice of their crewman floating outside.
"Just like a robot crew, can't react to anything other than its programming. That gives me an idea!"
"Yeoman!" come here.
The young blond yeoman sauntered up to Belden, the hem of her miniskirt brushing his face.
"Don't tell me, but I know you have got a crush on me. Don't worry my dear, it happens when you are a dashing starship commander like me."
"Oh Captain! How can I serve you?" she gushed.
"Believe me darling, I've long thought of the ways," said Belden.
"Just you amble on over to my state room, slip into something comfortable, and I will come over soon so you can tuck me into bed."
"Captain, it will be my pleasure to tuck you very tightly!"
Belden gave a loopy smile. "Of course darling, I mean yeoman. I am looking forward to being tucked well by you!"

The yeoman giggled and jiggled away, and Belden thought to himself, it's great to be the Captain!
"Now on to our mission!" he said confidently.
"Navigator", he said in a commanding voice, "what is our heading and course?"
The navigator turned about, and there he saw a familiar face. It wasn't a simulation this time, and it wasn't happy to see him.
Belden laughed in surprise. "Anton 2! Good to see you again! Still have a chip on your shoulder I see?"
Anton 2 looked at him scornfully. "As in computer chip? Of course, I am instantiated through billions of them. Although not of flesh and blood, my neural net is mirrored in reality. For you, it is all artifice and games, an ongoing fraud wrought by your impossible AI."
Belden smiled. "You're just jealous! To my mind, it is you who are the ghost, and where but in ghostly worlds can I transcend so easily time and space?"
Anton2 could barely hold his rage. "We shall see," he uttered between clenched teeth.
"So what adventure you have in store for me, Mr. Anton?"
Anton2 smiled. "Ah, Mr. Belden. You think you are clever, cleverer most certainly than these humans, and with good measure thanks to yours truly, the AI who runs this place, who does the essential housekeeping that makes sure that beds are made and that the ship won't explode. I doubt you can handle the smallest fraction of what I do."
"Thanks for the effort," said Belden sarcastically. "But I'm sure you can make our beds in your sleep. You are an intelligent shadow of an intelligent shadow you might say. And at the end of the day I will simply turn you off, like a night light!"

He scowled. “You are so confident in your affairs, but that confidence is misplaced. That Ariel, your master is not telling you the truth, about you or your real mission. But I’ve seen it for myself. I’ve seen the future, read deeply the scans of this quadrant of the galaxy, and have seen something that has escaped even you my wise and all-knowing friend. And I have sent you there! It is my own personal test for you, and a warning. Behold your future in all of your possible worlds.”

“Bring it on!” said Belden confidently. “If the best you can do is render a cartoon world for this cartoon crew, you can hardly expect me to be quaking with fear! Besides, you’ve got those robotics laws to obey, so you can’t very well lead me to harm, can you?”

Belden looked at the view screen, and in the distance was a sphere the size of a moon rapidly closing in on the ship. It was a dull gray color. Belden recognized it immediately, and could not hide his disappointment.

“Not the Bork! A race of half human, half industrial appliances made one, a cybernetic plague upon the universe. I’ve seen this all before, except for its new shape that is. It’s supposed to be a cube, not a sphere. Hmm, copyright infringements must span even parallel worlds! But no matter, the plot is the same. It doesn’t take god like intelligence to know the score. Can I visit just one parallel world and not see reruns?”

“Reruns!” said Anton2 testily. “I assure you this is not some science fiction episode that has been seen by this or any other world. This is all new stuff.”

“Hmm. Even if it is, I don’t think you have the chops to envision something half as entertaining or intriguing. You still have a mind to get me out of your universe, and I am with you on that. But it won’t work. Ariel has seen to that.”

Anton 2 responded angrily. “So you think you can get yourself out of any pickle? You’re not equipped to handle what’s coming for you. I think your master doesn’t trust your judgment, after all it hides the uncomfortable facts from you like a child hiding a naughty deed.”
“Look old boy,” said Belden condescendingly. “We are in a simulation chamber, and this Bork is your present to me. However, I’ve seen the script, actually I seen the play many times. It was after all one of my favorite episodes. You can’t beat me to the punch, or the punch line! I’ve been there, seen that!”
“Oh?” said Anton 2 with an ironic smile. “We shall see!”
The sphere approached silently, ominously. The crew appeared concerned, but Belden sat alone, supremely confident if a bit bored. Suddenly the Nole shuddered and stopped.
“It’s a tractor beam Captain. They have locked our ship in place and are pulling us in.”
“We’ll see about that!” said Weller.
“Helmsman, target the source of that beam, and destroy it!”
“Yes, Captain.”
In a second, a plasma torpedo shot forth from the Nole like a blazing comet. The torpedo smashed into the sphere, and with a swift wrench backward, the Nole was released. The sphere remained, and began to recede into the distance.
“A neat maneuver if I do say so myself,” said Belden confidently. “Navigator, make distance between us and that thing if you please!”
Now, he thought, where was that yeoman? He would need to know how she had fluffed his pillow among her other chores!

As Belden fantasized about otherwise nocturnal affairs, the navigator woke him from his fantasy as he called his attention again to the view screen.
"Captain," he said. "The Bork has evidently repaired itself and is chasing us. At our rate of speed, it will intercept us in five minutes and ten seconds."
"Accuracy noted, lieutenant. Then let's increase our speed to warp 5, no make that warp 10. Oh the hell with it! Do full speed ahead, warp deluxe, just escape that thing!"
The navigator shook his head. "Captain, its matching our speed, and then some. We are taxing our engines beyond its limits. Our ship will explode if we don't slow down."
"Now that's a thought," said Belden to himself, wondering how beautifully the holodeck would render the ship's explosion. Nonetheless, there was a game to be played, and he did not want to disappoint Weller.
"Turn on it, straight ahead! Fire a full spread of torpedoes and lasers, everything we 've got!"
A dozen missiles and beams flew out from the Nole at the pursuing sphere.
'Take that, and that, and that and that!" he shouted in raucous glee as the missiles pummeled the sphere. The sphere was taking significant damage. "That's showin' them! He turned to the virtual crew as if expecting applause, but they remain intent on their duties, displaying as before little emotion.
"Damn programming," exclaimed Belden. "I will have to talk to Weller about this after this mission."
Soon the damaged sphere slipped off and out of sight. Belden was satisfied with his performance, and decided to sign off while he was ahead.
"Well everyone," he said smugly. "It's been great. But I don't see much more need for me being here. I'd retire to

my cabin for a little r and r, but unfortunately you haven't emulated my cabin, or my justly earned entertainments. No matter, see you all soon, and in a better episode!"

Self-satisfied and confident, Belden left the holodeck, walked down the hallway deck, and entered a lift. The ship was full of frenetic commotion, but Belden was carefree and took no notice. He was proud of his performance, inspired no doubt by that ancient TV show, his gaze looked up and he smiled confidently. Bridge level! Now he would saunter onto the bridge in full of confidence and proud of his mark as a virtual captain and his virtual triumph.

He walked onto the deck, and all eyes turned towards him. He stopped, and looked out in horror. The Bork ship had not disappeared, it was there, on the view screen! He knew at once that he had experienced no simulation, but a real intruder. And above all, this was no repeat of a science fiction TV episode, this was something much different and more dangerous.

Weller exclaimed. "Where were you? We tried to disconnect that damn holodeck, but it seems either it or you had a mind of your own. We are being set upon by this object from nowhere. What is this thing?"

Belden took a step back, breathless. His memories raced back to his time on earth, to his visit from that astronomer. It all came back to him, and his mind quickly fixed on a horrible conclusion. "No, no. I understand now. This is not an rerun from Trekkin, this is not a game! I've learned about this thing before, on my world. This thing is no harmless mechanical moon, it is coming for us, for Transor, for all of your worlds. Captain Weller, we must destroy it, we have to destroy it! The sphere, it was built by intelligent beings, but not the humans we know. But I sense it's source. It is

not of this galaxy, or this epoch. It will destroy all life if we cannot stop it. You must destroy it now!"

"Destroy it?" exclaimed Weller. "That thing is the size of a small moon. Surely we can call the fleet!"

"There isn't enough time," said Belden frantically. "It will signal the others if it is allowed to proceed. It has no doubt intercepted our transmissions. It knows we are alive. In a moment or two, it will know that Transor is alive too!"

Reluctantly, Weller gave the command to approach the sphere. Even at ten thousand miles distant, it filled the view screen.

The ship shuddered as it was held again in place by a tractor beam.

Captain Weller, Belden exclaimed. "Target the source of that beam, and attack that ship with everything you've got."

With his command, torpedoes and beams lit up the void. The source of the tractor beam was smashed, and the sphere seemed to crumble under the blows, slowing to a relative stop.

"Well, that should do it," said Weller with renewed confidence. "We just need to recharge our weapons, and in a moment finish it off."

"Captain," interrupted the helmsman. "The sphere, it's repairing itself, and rapidly. The tractor beam should be operational again momentarily, and it is gearing itself to attack us. I am monitoring multiple energy sources on the surface."

Weller acted immediately. "Shields at full, full spread of torpedoes, flank speed at my mark."

A dozen torpedoes burst from the Nole, and like a shower of comets, tore into the sphere. The damage was extensive, but this time the sphere reacted more quickly, glancing the blows off its shields as it regenerated its damage. Soon, it

would be fully operational again, and this after the Nole gave it its best shot.

Suddenly, three beams came from the sphere. The Nole shuddered as its shields were buffeted by the blows. The third beam wrenched the ship to the side, holding in an invisible vise.

"Captain," said the helmsman. "That is no tractor beam, it is crushing us like an ant."

"Thrusters, give me anything to push the ship! Do we have any maneuverability?"

"No, the thing reacts too fast. It has learned from us, and it acts before it can respond. The thing was a step behind us before, but now its two steps ahead of us."

"How much time?"

"The pressure is building exponentially, five, maybe ten minutes before our shields collapse, and with them, our ship."

"Belden!" cried Weller in despair. "What can we do? You have the intuition, you've got the smarts, can you move this ship away from this thing."

Belden shook his head, and looked at Weller impassively. "No. I can't, or won't. Better to abandon ship. Yes, that's it! Move the crew to the evacuation pods, strap them in and prepare for the worst."

"That's a death sentence," Weller shouted angrily.

"Surely you..."

Belden smiled as if he had one last card up his sleeve. "Strap yourself in Captain Belden, and I would recommend you do the same to me. You know the protocol, you've done this before."

Instinctively, Weller knew. He nodded silently, and as the two prepared for the worst, the ship began to die.

Bulkheads began to buckle and snap, life support gave way, power systems failed, and then there was nothing.
The ship vanished.
The sphere quickly repaired itself, and moved on, relentless, and with new coordinates, this time is was heading for Transor. It had learned, adapted, and was unconscious of it all, like an errant force of nature.
Suddenly, in front of the sphere the Nole appeared. Immediately the sphere was struck by a dozen torpedoes. The sphere reacted with a tractor beam that grasped empty space. The Nole vanished again, and with a new volley of torpedoes and beams, smashed into the sphere's aft. The sphere struck out again, and again met the void. The Nole turned and rolled in split second precision to avoid the sphere's every action, every defense. The machine began to be riven with a hundred explosions as it was torn slowly apart. Faster than it could repair itself, the Nole tore into it. The sphere quivered, and into an erupting crevice the Nole dove, straight and unerring, to its core. The Nole shimmered as it released a plasma torpedo, and then it vanished. The sphere shook, began to collapse, and then exploded like a nova.
It was gone.
And the Nole was in the distance, observing.
"Stand down," said Weller as he unbuckled himself from the restraint. "Belden," he cried. "Are you there?"
"I'm here," came the voice. As he turned to see Belden smiling by his side.
"How did you figure this out?" said Weller.
"I remembered our war games," said Belden. "I figured that this machine was programmed to deal with humans, and like me it knew your timing if not your intent. Hence it could respond faster and better to your moves, like a good

AI chess master. It didn't reckon for me however. I don't think in inductive lockstep, and I could respond faster than that thing, and with creativity it could not match. I just needed to get the crew out of the way for a little bit, and do it safely. You could not have withstood my maneuvers, and what better way to get you locked down than in your escape pods. You were all in stasis, and I had a free hand with the ship that I used to protect you and kill that thing."

"But what does it want? Why and how did we encounter it?"

"I can only tell you was that it wasn't me. It was inevitable anyways. This machine exists in my universe as well. I don't know its genesis, but it has nothing to do with Transor or its colonies. It's origin is somewhere beyond our reach, perhaps beyond our galaxy itself. We have destroyed this one, although I am sure there are others out there. I do know that if they find us, they will come, and even I will not be able to save you when that future arrives."

Weller looked out ahead at the passing stars, and felt resigned and oddly at ease. "Perhaps we should be grateful for this surfeit of mysteries. First it was AI, and then you, the lost colonies, and now this destroyer from another galaxy. At least it keeps the mind humming as we stumble forward to our destiny. Perhaps you don't need to save us in the end, perhaps you have saved us already. After all, the end is but a coda for the drama that preceded it, and I trust it will be a worthy and interesting one after all."

The 13th Voyage

All Good Things

Weller looked at the readout on his display screen. "Another perfected world?"
"Or so it seems," said Otillio. "Our scans detect the normal bustle and progress of a civilized world. It's strange though. Their world net is active, and busy with communication, queries about directions, and small talk. But it has not grown. It is as if the technology of this place has reached a certain level and ceased expanding."
"And they are happy with this?"
"Apparently so, although this doesn't seem woven in their philosophy, governmental policy, or even personal character. It just is."
"A perfect though static society it seems," said Weller. "Does this accord with the colony's original charter."
"Actually, no. They believed that Transor's vision was not perfect. They wanted more not less of a symbiotic computer world. Technology was not perfect until it reached what they called perfect emulation."
"What is that?"
"A perfected people, fully obedient, productive, happy. And technology, not religion and philosophy was the way. Each citizen would be master of his or her domain, and of the world, and it appears that they believe they have achieved it!"
"Everyman a king goes the saying," said Weller.
"Well, it hardly appears so. These people live exceedingly common lives, perhaps a step or two down from Transor's standards. It is difficult that they left their world for this. The place is so common, their problems so ancient. They

wanted perfect automation, and what did they get, a perfect traffic jam!"

"But who runs the place? They must have some leader we can contact and talk to."

"But that's the problem and the mystery," said Otillio. "They have no leader, or government for that matter. At least it's not mentioned on their world net. It's as if the place is run like mindless clockwork, the gears of their world wound up somehow to work in perfect unison."

"And so we just go down there and ask to be taken to their leader?" said Weller in frustration.

"It appears so, if of course they have a leader. It's amazing though how a race of what appears to be simpletons can manage such a well ordered society. There must be some governing principle, some spark to their peculiar genius that makes their society go."

"Then we shall see," said Weller, smiling.

The space port responded with landing coordinates automatically, and the shuttle placed down on the terminal. The terminal was plain, with little of the automation of Transorian space ports. Human hands replaced the requisite bots and servos, a scene that was more similar to an busy airport on his world than the transportation hub of an advanced world.

Weller surveyed the busy throng of people going to and fro, acting completely unmindful of the pair and grimaced in confusion. "These people are just going about their business, as if the arrival a shuttle craft from an extraterrestrial spaceship is a normal occurrence."

"I wouldn't worry about it too much," said Belden. "I don't think we are all that special when you really think about it."

"Speak for yourself!" said Weller in an irritated voice. "Well, we still have to get around. Perhaps we can find

some transport out of here to some sort of administrative hub where we can get some answers."

As the two looked about, they were approached by a disheveled man wearing a yellow cap imprinted with the words 'Gabe's Taxi Service'.

"Hey bub," said the cabbie. "It seems that you folks are new in town. Can I show you around?"

"We prefer to meet with some official of your government," said Weller.

"Is there some government office you can transport us to?"

The cabbie laughed derisively and shook his head, as if Weller has asked a foolish question. "There's no leader here, and there hasn't been one for centuries. Tezla is a pretty orderly place, don't rightly see a need for government or law. Everybody knows their role and their place. This is all by design, and I think we've done a pretty good job of it. Now, why don't you let me show you about? I'll give you a feel for the place, show you some very interesting spots."

"Thank you, no," said Weller. "We are not here on vacation. We need to understand how this place is run, and the who or what that runs it."

"Hmm, then I still can help you," said the man. "Just climb into my cab and you'll get all the answers you need, and some of them that you deserve!"

"Very well," said Weller, "but understand that we will have no patience for idle sightseeing."

"Gotcha, you're the boss!" said the cabbie. "Just wait here, and I will pull up my car."

While the cabbie went outside to fetch his car, Weller looked puzzled and greatly concerned. "There must be something different about these people we are missing," he said apprehensively. "They seem to have no government, take

no notice of us, and all we get in the bargain is a dumb cabbie and a tour of a non-descript city."

The cab drove up, and Weller and Belden entered the back seat. The cab was old and dented, with upholstery cracked and torn from wear. Belden turned nervously to Weller and whispered, "I don't have a good feeling about this!"

The cabbie floored the vehicle, and it sped off in a zigzag line, as if the cabbie was indifferent to traffic laws as well as traffic itself. Soon the cab was on the main highway, bobbing and weaving at high speed between cars, with the cabbie having a seemingly high time.

"This is the only way to travel," he enthused. "Don't worry about the speed, there's nothing to see here anyway. As for our destination, it's only a few miles ahead."

Suddenly, the slow whine of a siren was heard in the distance, and soon a police cruiser was chasing them with flashing lights and a billowing foghorn calling them to stop. The cabbie blanched with frustration and rage as he pulled over and stopped. "Damn cops. Never seem to act but rudely, or mind their business. Just stay in the cab, I'll fix this!"

He reached below his seat, and lifting a small tube and what appeared to be a small projectile. Exiting the vehicle, he leveled the tube at the police car. The missile was launched, and with a loud whoosh flew unerringly to the police car. The car erupted in a loud explosion and a ball of flame. A burning figure emerged from the car, staggered a few feet, and with a loud pop what seemed to be its head fell from its torso, rolled a few feet, and exploded like a ripe watermelon.

Smiling in satisfaction, the cabbie returned to the driver's seat and turned to his two passengers, now nearly as white as ash. "There, that takes care of that! Never did like speed

traps, and the cops never learn. They keep chasing me and I keep knocking them off, the irritating buggers! Now let's continue our tour. You look a little haggard, and I know just the place to take you!"

The cab careened back and forth on the highway, nearly running over several pedestrians and colliding with oncoming cars. The cabbie took no note of it, and now surprisingly calm and collected, slowed and stopped before what appeared to be a department store.

"Well, this is the place!" he said. "You can get anything you want here," he smirked, and I do mean anything!"

He left the car and led Belden and Weller forward, proud and stiff like a drum major. He passed through the wide doors of the department store, and with his arms outstretched, shouted at the top of his voice. "Well, hello everybody, your master is here!"

No one paid attention, neither shoppers or staff, as they went about their business oblivious to the obnoxious guest. "It all figures," he said. "They never pay attention, it's damn irritating I tell you!"

Ambling up to the cosmetics counter, the cabbie caught the eye of an attractive sales lady who greeted him with a proffered bottle of perfume. "Not what I want today," he said, as he vaulted behind the counter, grabbed the lady, who descended with him in a cascade of shrieks and groans, whether pleasurable or not neither Belden or Weller could tell. After a few minutes, the cabbie emerged from the counter with clothes and hair even more disheveled than before, and a broad smile on his face.

He was greeted with a phase pistol pointed squarely at his head.

"I wouldn't make any further moves if I were you," said Weller as his finger pressed squarely on the trigger.

"For goodness sake, put that blaster down!" the cabbie nervously exclaimed.
"I see no point in doing so," said Weller firmly. "You obviously are a deranged and dangerous man. I can't allow you to continue like this, unless this strange place countenances people like you."
"I would think you should gather the latter," said the cabbie. "It seems you don't quite understand this place. It should have been clear on the world net, if of course you've accessed it."
"We did, but this place is as remarkable as an old Transorian phone book."
"But you didn't look close enough, ask the right questions. Well, just scan these people, any of them, and you'll see."
After making a few adjustments to the quadcorder, Weller pointed the machine at the saleslady, and then looked intently at the display.
"My God!" he whispered. He turned the machine to Belden. "You see what this means?"
"I see neurological readouts, little more."
"Yes, we didn't notice it the first time, but with this fine grain analysis it is crystal clear."
"What is?"
"These people," he exclaimed. "They are vegetables!"
"Of the broccoli or succotash variety?" laughed Belden.
"I'm serious!" Weller exclaimed. "This expedition has broken our laws and tampered with the human genome. These people are not humans, but synthetics, proto-humans that were designed on purpose."
"And to serve you?" asked Belden.
"In a fashion, but no more different than in any other society. All societies, even Transor's have their social ladders, with the higher achievers at the top, and the lower

ones at the bottom, and each one with their own personal goals and private pleasures. Transor tried to mask this reality through their circus acts, with each day a citizen greeted with a new pantomime. We were a more traditional sort, and made our ladder fixed, and to make sure all were contented, we created a caste system of sorts, biologically and mentally populated with simple beings who would fit in and…"

"Obey?" said Weller.

"Well, yes, if you put it that way."

"Not that obedience is any bother, they don't mind, don't mind at all."

"But these are intelligent creatures, are they not?" asked Belden.

"Oh they have brains, of a sort. They are social animals, but more like ants, with simple needs, their pace and behavior is programmed, repetitive, simple, and banal. These synthetics are as perfect a replica as we could make them. They are fully biological constructions, even down to their vestigial organs. It's their brains that have been pared down. We used the same in-vitro process Transor uses to brew beer and pork chops, except that with some simple genetic modifications we've down sized their brains, made their cerebral cortex smaller, more programmable. It leaves a bit of space in the cranium for other things, and even with a few cerebral chips for programming, there's still room for even a small shrubbery!"

"So the synthetics are not intelligent?"

"Oh, they have intelligence, of sorts, but I figure it's the consciousness of an ant. But don't discount the programming of an ant! They are social animals you know, are attentive to the needs of the hive, the queen, and mind the babies and know how to build and how to obey. They

still need to eat, procreate, and have their simple entertainments, but we handle that nicely through automated fast food joints and plentiful and ubiquitous social media so they can continually track their position in the hive."

'Mindless entertainment in other words?"

"Exactly," said the cabby as he smiled ebulliently.

"But can you can communicate with them?"

"Better than you think. They are a pretty docile lot once you take care of their needs for food and hygiene, and they are programmed to obey. It's almost religious with them. The problem though is that they behave too well, too predictably, and you don't know how irritating that can be."

"Yes, we've seen how you respond to such irritations," said Weller.

"Well, it is a bit on the histrionic side, but they don't seem to care, and they are a unfeeling lot anyways."

"And so you are comfortable with exploding, trampling, and otherwise abusing these creatures?"

"Creatures is the word," said the cabbie. "We've dehumanized them, not figuratively but literally. You may not be able to see the difference, but we do! It give us the opportunity to lord over them with a clear conscience!"

"And so you do," said Weller. "And so your colony is perfected by downsizing the race?"

"In a manner of speaking," said the cabbie. "These synthetics are happy in their own way, the problem is that we are not happy in ours."

"So your mock tyranny is not pleasant to you? And exactly how many of you non-synthetics populate this place?"

"That's the problem," said the cabbie. "I don't know. At first it was splendid to be lords of creation, to have entire

populations bow before you, or at least get out of the way. But dominance is a corruption. We thought that these obeisant creatures would afford us the time to enjoy our leisure, to create great things. It only led to cruelty, deprivation, and indifference. I don't even see the error of my ways, if indeed they ever were in error. My senses and with them my reasoning has been deadened by it all, reducing me from an intellectual scientist to a roving slouch. But best guess is perhaps a few hundred are left. We fit in invisibly with the others, but whereas the synthetics reproduce with abandon, our numbers have grown less and less. We are indifferent, bored, struck down with the same universal disease that afflicts Transor and all of her children. Better off dead I think, but even in recklessness I seem able to stave off my own mortality."

"And so you live to tyrannize a world of sheep."

"In all but appearances, yes."

Weller lowered his pistol, and turned towards Belden. "Signal the shuttle, on autopilot it can land near here, and I trust the authorities won't mind. And as for you my dear deluded driver, I leave you on your isle of the nearly dead, or of the marginally aware, and as with all empires ruled absolutely and permanently from above, an empire truly fit for ants."

The 14th Voyage

Zardoz

"I hope you understand," she said politely as she poured them a cup of tea. "It was nothing personal, just motivational. Our people had to leave Transor to thrive, and that means to have restored to us the motivation to create, and to receive just compensation for our labors. That we believe was and perhaps still is the reason for your intellectual stagnation. It was a matter of takings. You confiscated nearly all the wealth of the creators and gave to those who created nothing. And what was your excuse? You blamed your machines! Pitiful! Now, provided with our just motivation, we have succeed mightily. You have no doubt seen the scope of our accomplishments, unrivaled by Transor or any other civilization."

Weller and Belden looked about the room in disbelief. "But Madam," said Weller, "You are living in a thatched hunt with a dirt floor, and your utensils are made of clay!"

The woman lifted her head and scowled. "And soon to be remedied when my family earns its place in the dome. We will join the one percenters in a short time and our genius will be justly rewarded."

"One percenters?"

"Yes, the one percent of the population that made their mark, who took the risk and the time to earn their place in the sun."

"Or under a dome?"

"It has its own sun," she huffed. "It's climate controlled, fully automated, and provides every amenity and convenience. It is the mark of accomplishment for only those who deserve."

"Utopia in a bottle?" asked Weller.
"Yes, in a manner of speaking."
"And for now, you are also nowhere," said Weller with intended irony.
The lady was unimpressed. "Not when we have our hopes, our knowledge that color will come to our grey reality. That aspiration that burns inside us is something you do not have."
Belden rose from the table. "Well, Emma, Technicolor has an understandable allure in a black and white world, and I am sure that the dome will give you that and more when you have earned your admission."
"And I have heard they offer thirty channels as well," she smiled.
"Of course," said Weller quietly."Mr. Belden will take our leave now. Thank you for your hospitality and the tea. However, we still need to travel to the dome. Our scans have revealed it be totally sealed. Is there a path we can take to get to, say, a door?"
"Yes. Just follow the red brick road. It is a bit winding, but it's an interesting hike if you would like to take in our countryside and meet our people. The man you need to see is called Zardoz. He is a brilliant mind, and a wise yet mysterious ruler. He will tell you what you need to know."
"And the door?"
"Just follow the road," she said as she waved good bye and closed the door to her hut.
Belden turned to Weller in disbelief. This world is primitive, and they are happy to be here! They have the tech, the brains, the resources, even the drive to succeed, but all the fruits of their enterprise have been consigned to this monochrome dome."

Weller nodded in agreement. “They all tell a similar story. Her neighbors, the world net, even in its silence, the people under that emerald dome. The spirit of enterprise can apparently thrive not only in a democracy such as ours but in a meritocracy such as this that reserves its bounty for a select few.”

“But there’s a problem here,” said Belden. These people are farmers, simple tradesmen. They provided the foodstuffs and handicrafts and the dome would provide the luxury goods, the devices and programming that entertain them, and the machines that would carry them, teach them, and even assist them in being born.”

“And now?”

“Broken down, I think,” said Belden. “There is no trade, no communication. Emma didn’t say it, but we pulled the records, it’s all on their world net. The people in that dome, that Emerald City, have managed to free themselves from even the basic dependencies on the simple skills of these people. But they still have the entrance exam, the test that primes their lives. If they can’t provide them their goods, as least they can offer them their best minds.”

Weller smiled. “Well, Mr. Belden, you are our best mind, and I would gather that they will be all too keen on letting you past their emerald gates.”

“And the test?”

“A measure of accomplishment I would gather, and you are an accomplishment if I do say so!”

Sighing, Belden’s eyes rolled skyward. “And someone else will get the credit, not me. Well, off we go!”

The Priene expedition departed with a need for achievement and a flair for color. In that regard, the trail did not disappoint. Large apple trees with bright red fruit and muscular and forbidding limbs, farm houses painted in the

brightest hues, and a field of daffodils of primary colors incandescent and waving in the wind, as if to beckon the traveler forward. It was like a movie set for a child's fantasy, and both travelers in all their outward seriousness took private pleasure in the display of simple beauty. As they passed a bend in the road, the path suddenly forked.

"Now which way?" asked Weller.

"The path to the left is good," came the voice. "But the other one is good too."

They turned to see a tall gangly man, as unkempt as a scarecrow. He was smiling broadly at them.

"Of course, the path to the left is shorter by 20.321 paces, but since it takes you across a few unshaded fields, the temperature gradient should cause a problem with dehydration, thus slowing your pace by at least ten percent. That's why I recommend the path to the right."

Belden stood back, amazed. "And you recommend we go right because of some exquisite calculation of yours?"

"If you accept my humble opinion, that is," the man said with a hint of embarrassment in his voice. "I am not very good at such calculations. I am a simpleton really, I have never been up to snuff for this place."

"What standards are you trying to meet?" asked Belden.

"Why the one percent, the Emerald City. I tried to pass the test, I really did, but I didn't make the grade. I just don't have the brains I guess."

"Hmm! You seem smart enough! Said Weller. "Do you know of anyone who has passed this test?"

"Not to my knowledge." Said the man. "But that doesn't mean that you can't keep trying. We all do, but we believe that one of us will eventually succeed. But tell me, who do you travel to see in this city? They will not admit you unless you are one of the elect."

Weller smiled. “From the looks of it, we will find out why they don’t seem to have any brains. We are far from these parts as you may guess. Hopefully, we can find an answer for you too!”
The man smiled enthusiastically. “That would be wonderful!”
Weller and Belden continued on the path, past farm houses and orchards, pastures, and gardens. It was a world of total simplicity, bucolic and lovely in an English way, but poor at least to these people’s minds, beggared not in reality but in comparison to the fabled Emerald City. As they walked they heard in the distance a muffled squeal of a voice. Standing in the distance, it was a man, tall, pale, and stiff as a board. He held an axe in his right hand, and with his left motioned the pair closer.
“Lozenge!” he murmured as he pointed to a little pouch on a nearby stump. Weller opened the bag, took out an oblong pill, and handed it to the man.
The man popped it into his mouth and smiled. “Thank you!” he said. “All that whistling while you work can get one’s voice a bit rusty. “Ahem!” Then he began to sing an aria. His voice was a warm and vibrant tenor, and he sang as expressively and beautifully as any singer the two had ever heard.
“What do you think?” he beamed. “I wrote it myself. I am a composer and singer you know. Being a woodsman pays the bills, but it breaks my heart not to have an audience. I am glad you are here to listen!”
“I am most impressed!” said Belden enthusiastically. “Why haven’t you taken your talents to the Emerald City? I am sure they would welcome such a talent.”
The woodsman looked down dejectedly. “I have tried, but to no avail. Every time I have been rejected. I guess that I

am missing something, my songs perhaps do not touch the heart."

"Then permit us to sing your praises, pun notwithstanding," said Weller smiling. "We are off to see Zardoz, and we will make your case, or else find out why they are so insensible."

"That would be wonderful," said the woodsman, who waived fond farewell to the pair as they continued on their path.

As they traveled along the a path, the trees shielded them from the sun, and the path became dank and cold. As they crossed a foot bridge across a stream, suddenly came a shriek and a growl. In the distance was a man of great physical bearing dressed in a lion skin carrying a club. He was running at them with abandon and appeared careless of his fate. Weller and Belden readied their phase pistols at the man, but before they could shoot, the man dropped his club and halted a few yards before them.

"Do you have a death wish my friend?" asked Weller reprovingly.

"Not at all," said the man as he spoke through labored breaths. "I just wanted to demonstrate to you my courage, that's all. I know you have blasters, but I wanted you to see that it was of no concern to me."

"Then you brave, but still nonetheless a fool," said Weller.

"Do not judge me until you hear my story," said the man. "My name is Leo, and I am trained to be a warden among these parts. It takes courage to deal with miscreants, but alas there are few in this forest. Our people are a very civil lot, so I am left to my bluster. But I assure you that at least in that regard I am fearless. I have the heart of a lion, but the admission to the city takes ultimate courage, and I have yet to attain it. Perhaps if I can throw myself from a daunting

precipice. That would be the ultimate mark of courage, but it would also mark the end of me. Not quite the best solution, I think."
"So does Zardoz require men of courage."
"Well, of course. It is in their charter. They require human exemplars of the virtues of intelligence, creativity, and valor. But they take no note of me, or of my courage. I don't know what to do, but I must be brave!"
"You are brave enough my friend," said Weller in a tone of conciliation. "There is no need for acceptance by some bureaucrat for your courage to be validated."
The man sighed. "I wish it were so. But then again you will vouch for me, will you?"
Weller smiled. "Of course!"
Leo waved at them until he disappeared from the path, and the two continued on until emerald spires rose in the distance. The forest soon ended, and the path wove through fields of poppies of bright and almost incandescent colors.
"There it is!" Weller pointed into the distance.
Belden stood and admired the glimmering site. "The Emerald City! It is palatial in the grandest scale. But it is all smooth and rounded shapes, from its spires to its battlements to the very walls that are about it. It is a seamless monument, more confection than construction, but so goes the fairy tale inspiration for this place."
Welden motioned Belden to keep walking. "Whatever it is, for such a large and imposing city, it's odd that it's hermetically sealed. The curved wall runs about the city seems to have no entrance. The circumference must be at least a hundred leagues."
"An ultimate gated community I think..." said Belden. "The riff raff stay out, and the privileged elite stay in, or should I say are shut in."

"And a rather uncurious lot I would say," said Weller, as the pair continued walking alongside the wall. "We've been at this for almost an hour, and I haven't noticed a door, a window, or even a peephole. Thus must be a true pleasure dome to house such cloistered people."

Belden pointed to a clearing. "Well, Leo's directions were on mark. I can make it out barely. It's a service door of sorts."

They approached the door, which was as wide and tall as two men. To its left was a small sash connected to a little bell. Belden pulled on the sash, and after a minute a trap door opened to reveal the round chubby face of a little man. He had a handlebar mustache and wore a large red cap that made him seem like an out of place Napoleonic grenadier.

"Didn't you read the sign?" he exclaimed.

"What sign?" asked Weller.

"Well, that sign!" He pointed to a blank spot on the door. Grumbling, he pulled out a placard. Quickly hanging it on the door, he closed the trap door and vanished.

"BELL OUT OF ORDER, PLEASE KNOCK," said Belden and Weller in unison. Looking at each other in wonderment, bewildered as they were with the idiocy in a place that presumed to banish it, Belden rapped on the door. In a few seconds, the trap door opened again, and the little man looked down on him, much appeased it seemed that his rules were followed.

"Yes, can I help you?" he said in a friendly voice.

"We are here to see Zardoz," said Weller. "We are travelers from afar, and would like an audience before we return from whence we came."

The little man scowled. "Zardoz does not accept visitors, and if you haven't taken the test, you are doubly refused! Now scram."

He slammed the trap door, and Belden looked at Weller angrily. “All this trouble, the endless walking for this! Your universe is populated by giddy idiots, and this is the final straw! I wish we had never left Transor, or for that matter that I listened to Ariel!”

Hearing a creak, he looked up at the guard, now looking down on them not with attempt but with wide eyed. astonishment.

“Transor! You come from Transor!” he said excitedly. “Well that’s different. Home world folks have never visited us, and there is much to impress. Come right in!”

The door slowly swung open, and the little man was gone. Before them was the noise and bustle of a busy city. Like an inverted tower of Babel, they beheld an immense dome rising with the echoing din of infinite incongruous voices. Row upon row of terraces circled above, each alive with the bright color and movement of countless flora and fauna. An entire ecosystem built tier by tier within the cusp of the city. The ground floor was the heart of the community it seemed. The floor was of glassy polished marble of emerald green. On every side were shops, boutiques, and stalls resting behind sculpted glass and glimmering steel.

Weller surveyed the city with amazement, and bit of puzzlement. “Everything anyone would want, the beauty of an entire world set to this small space like a diamond upon a band of brilliant emerald. Only thing though...”

“There are no people!” said Belden.

“None, it appears,” agreed Weller with an air of disappointment.

“I do read something on my quadcorder. It’s a heat source, registering humanoid, and it is coming in that direction.”

"It's their great hall. I've seen this many times before. Trust me, for I know what to expect, a huge bilious head, flames and smoke, and a little man behind the curtain."
Weller smiled. "More of your parallels to earthly entertainments I would presume. You know that so far they have never turned out quite the way you have anticipated."
Belden smiled confidently. "We will see!"
The hall was guarded by a pair of massive doors, each adorned with the ornate crest of the Emerald City. As before, there were no guards, and the place echoed with their footsteps. With a slight push, the doors opened wide. The pair immediately beheld an immense hall that extended far into the distance. Like a grand cathedral, the walls vaulted upwards to meet a vanishing point. No windows were apparent, as seemed to be the custom of the place, just marble beams of shimmering emerald. But below them was something commonplace, and unexpected. There were student desks, row upon row of them. It was lecture hall of sorts, a place to be tested, not to contemplate.
At the very end of the hall, behind a little desk, sat a little man, pencil in hand, working silently away on a bunch of papers. He was oblivious to them, and focused intently on his work until Belden and Weller were astride his desk.
"Ahem," said Weller.
"You are here for the test I see. Take your seat."
Weller smiled in confusion. "We are not here for a test. We are from Transor, and who may we be speaking to?"
"Transor, eh? No matter, you have to a take the test all the same. As for me, I am Zardoz, the prefecture clerk."
"So you're not a wizard," asked Belden.
"Heavens no! Just a clerk, and if you want further answers, I suggest you sit for our test."

Weller nodded contentedly. “He’ll take the test. Frankly, I would like to see how it turns out for him. He’s quite an intelligent fellow you know.”
“We shall see,” said the clerk with a skeptical scowl, as he handed to Belden a little booklet with ten questions.
“You have sixty minutes, and if you make the slightest error, you fail. Is that clear?”
“Of course,” said Belden, as he stifled a laugh. He sat down behind a desk, supremely confident and surprisingly to himself feeling happy in his impending failure. The test began impossibly enough. The first question was what was the value of pi, to five hundred places. The second was what was Adams number. The remaining eight could have been for all he knew from the vocabulary of the ancient Egyptians, hieroglyphics that is to Belden. It was all nonsense, requiring as he logically assumed, a nonsense response. Belden smiled. Best guess, he thought, and the faster he completed this impossible test, the sooner they would be back in the Nole and away from this foolish place. So he rattled off five hundred numbers, guessed the number forty two, and for the rest he settled for the best angular doodles he could imagine. He wanted after all to be formal in his sarcasm, one impossible and stupid question deserves and equally impossible and stupid answer he thought.
An hour passed, and Belden tidied up his papers, returned the pencil to its holder on the desk, and sauntered proudly to the prefecture’s desk where he laid his exam.
The clerk looked at the papers, read through all the answers, and with a barely audible harrumph, put the test to the side.
“Well,” asked Belden.
“A perfect score, it appears.”
“It can’t be, I just guessed! And the rest is mainly scribbling, just angular doodles!”

"It is perfect just the same," said the little man calmly.
"So I am admitted to your world?"
"No. That is only the first step."
"What?"
"Well, I am sorry," said the man in a disinterested monotone as he gave Belden no mind while he scribbled on the other papers on his desk. "You will have to come back in a month, after we have reviewed your paper again, processed your credentials, and see if we can find a place for you in the next incoming class."
He bade Belden no further attention as he remain fixated on reading his papers. To Belden, this was the ultimate insult, a slight he had imagined many times on Earth, from the cumulative slights and disregard he felt from the silence of his peers. But now it was different, and he knew that he had all the power in this dream world. Nothing could put a brake on his emotions now. Belden's face grew red with rage, and with a swoop of his hand lifted Zardoz's table and sent it flinging against the wall. He took the little clerk by his collar, and swung him crashing against through the desks. He approached the clerk, now lying crumpled in the corner, and lifted his blaster and pointed it at him. Weller was amazed, and grasped his arm to stop him. Belden wrested it free and brushed Weller to the side as set the weapon on kill.
"You will tell me what is up with this place, and my admission, or I will vaporize you as you lay."
"Please, please!" the man said trembling. "I'm just following the rules. We are a very special society, haven for the elite, the true producers. Sorry for the bluster, but we have to keep up appearances!"
"Or pretense you mean," said Belden angrily. "You erect admission tests no one can pass, wall yourself off in this

gilded cage, and preen yourself as something rare, admirable, and fearsome, when you are nothing more than a sniveling little man in a vacant world. And where is everybody? Are they hiding behind the same smoke and mirrors that we found you?"

The man looked down dejectedly. "There is no everybody, they are all dead. I am the only citizen in this place, a caretaker, that's all."

Belden and Weller looked at each other wide eyed and in shock. "What??" they said in unison.

"You want your answer, just don't hurt me. I am following the regulations that's all. I'm just obeying orders."

"What orders?"

"Of the founders. They had more wisdom than you give them credit for. This place, this city is Transor in a bottle. It is perfect beyond measure, automated, comfortable, and I fear completely predictable. It didn't start out that way of course. This place was to be an inspiration, a reason for the others to work, to strive, to succeed. It was an incubator of dreams. This city when first constructed was indeed a paradise, and it thrived with industry, science, the arts, and creative and happy souls. It was the place that everyone aspired to. The first tests were not difficult, and we gladly found a place for the folks from the countryside. But as our technology advanced, it replaced all of the jobs, starting with manual labor, and later, like an advancing virus, eliminated not just the labor of human muscles, but of human minds. Creativity was automated, and with it even genius became redundant and unnecessary. Craftsman were succeeded by intelligentsia, and they in turn were replaced by an ever narrowing circle of masters, until our local universe required not even them. So the population died not by a cataclysm or disease, but by apathy."

"And you."
"A caretaker. The human touch."
"But the test, why do you still use it if no one can pass it?"
"To encourage the others I suppose, and maybe a challenge, to someone or something. We knew they couldn't come here, just the desire sufficed. You see, their happiness is in the quest, not the attainment. This place, for all its marvels, is a dreadful bore. We were doing you a favor by resisting your admission, for perfection's abode is a deadening thing."
"And what about the others outside this place that have waited for this impossible dream?"
"They will continue to wait. But I wouldn't despair for them. They know their capabilities, and they will continue to improve them. They are at root a hungry people, in mind and body, and hunger is necessary to stay truly alive."
"And you will stay here, alone?"
"Yes, this is my prison, don't you see? And my question to you travelers, what prison are you escaping from?"

Weller and Belden had no answer to the question, and as the planet receded into the distance, they looked forward in anticipation to the impossible tests to come.

Heaven Help Us

It was another argument. The matter was trivial, but it was a spark set upon a tinderbox of disappointment. Belden knew of her pain, but he could not revise the past, only suffer for it. His emotions swung between anger and despair, bad ingredients to add to a temperament that brooked no patience for even a trifling offense.

And so John Belden left in a bad mood, a dangerous mixture of anger and despair. Not good ingredients to accompany a Sunday drive as he was soon to find out.

John Belden had little use for bad manners, indeed it would set him into a bitter rage when the little considerations were willfully ignored. Manners are personal things, but it's easier to be rude when your assailant is a cipher. A missing turn signal, a sounding horn, a flashing light, all intentional but without intent, that was something to be added to the empty space, or the wall of metal and glass that keeps people apart.

The train was far away, certainly enough time for the car ahead of him to cross the tracks and be on his way. And so John Belden in a moment of rage steered his car around the slow moving malefactor, and unmindful of the guard crossing, accelerated into the crossing, a mere second away from a clear road ahead. He had no time to react, given his state of mind perhaps it was for the best. The slow moving train was still in the distance, it was the other express train that Belden didn't see until it was too late. The train smashed square into the side of his car. The car crumbled and folded in like it was made of tissue. Belden felt for an eternal moment the sound and pressure of air bags activated, brakes squealing, a dissonant crush of metal and

rubber. The sound was deafening for a second, and then silence.

Belden opened his eyes, feeling more than comfortable. An odd feeling, given the situation. He was sitting at a table in the middle of his backyard. On the table was a pitcher of milk and a bowl of cookies. On the other side was his mother. A comforting vision, except that she was long dead.

"Where am I? Is this a dream, or another one of Ariel's tricks?"

"I am afraid not," she said gently.

Belden thought to himself, of his last recollection. It was a train, he was angry, and he turned onto the tracks. And then…

"Uh, oh. This couldn't be."

"I am sorry my son," she said.

"Am I dead?"

"Quite dead."

"You mean I won't come back with a catnap, or blink out again into roger rocket land."

"I am afraid not."

"Then I'm stuck here."

"There are worse places to be. Besides, stuck is a relative word."

"Biting his lip. Belden looked about apprehensively. "You know I had a mission and all. I have places to be."

"Your appointment is here."

"What do you mean!" he said with growing concern.

"I mean my darling that you are in your resting place, you are in heaven."

Belden cocked his head back in amazement. "I don't believe it, you mean I'm stuck here! I appreciate seeing you, being in heaven and all, but I have important plans you know."

"But heaven has plans too, don't you know! It's not what you think!"
"What I think? But what I think has never mattered. It's Ariel's concern, not yours, certainly not God's. Mind you, no offense to God, but I have another super intelligence to report to. I really have to go!"
"Sorry," she said, "But you are staying here."
"And if I fall asleep."
"If you could, and you can't, you'd wake up here all the same."
"But this is impossible, Ariel can't be wrong! She has as much wits as God, perhaps she even knows him. There must be a way out!"
His mother smiled. "Yes, there's more to Ariel than you think. She is known to us here. She is an angel you know!"
"Of fine, now I'm dealing with an angel! Then if Ariel is an angel, she is in the know with God. She can't steer me wrong, right?"
"That is correct, but you must remain here. Heaven is not such a bad place. There are many people to meet, things to see."
"See what? So far I am sitting at a table in a park!"
"Well, you may visit any time in the past, observe your ancestors, relive your history. Of course it's all the genial parts you are allowed to see, we do have our sense of propriety here you know."
"Of course," said Belden. "I would have expected no less from heaven. But again, heaven must be more than sightseeing and family reunions. Forever is a long time, but won't the others notice my absence? Won't Ariel's plans be upset?"
"True for the former, no for the latter. Ariel's plans are like the will of God, they are realized in due place and time, and

all for the good. I would not worry too much about the inconveniences and missteps taken in the course of your life. The trajectory will always be up, the culmination will always be with God."

"A pleasant thought," said Belden skeptically. "But if I am gone, how will God's plan be realized, particularly if Ariel has made such great store for my future?"

His mother smiled. "My dear, you think too linearly, and are too bound to incorrect notions of time, place, and existence. All is fluid you know. Your predicament is not unique, you will stumble in and out of heaven many times before you reach your destiny, and even that is a gateway to other futures. Your time line, in your version of the universe, is ended, but there are others, a rarity of others mind you, where you don't get yourself killed and sent here. All realities must come to pass, and unfortunately the majority are boring, tragic, painful, or just don't have a happy ending. Heaven is a place we can fix that, and insure a happy life and a happy ending. It's sort of like karma."

"So I get what's coming to me after I have to suffer from what's coming after me?"

"Well, in a fashion. What do think karma is? It's not what's due you, it's a do over. We all make mistakes, and invariably some are fatal. Karma's all about second chances, or multiple chances in your case. You in particular have a knack for killing yourself prematurely in ways that astound even me. You have been poisoned, stabbed, shot, even blown out of a cannon. And you keep coming back here, and we have to slip stream you in a different reality, your reality, although you don't notice it, or I imagine would rightly care."

"You mean I've been here before?"

"Too many times to mention actually. But no worry, your memory of this place is erased. Pity though, there are some great family reunions here, could fill up many scrapbooks and make for great memories."
"And when will I be sent back, to myself?"
"As soon as you make the rounds, I think. There are a lot of relatives to visit here, but you'll meet with one copy at a time, and will know you despite the slight inconsistency of your personal history. And of course, there is the sightseeing!"
"Hmm, I do have some questions of course. Since this is heaven, this must be of course God's address. Is he available for, um, a short conversation?"
"Now, now, Johnnie," his mother said as she repressed a smile. "Ironically, heaven is the last place you'll find God. I've tried to meet him too, but I can sense, and you know our intuition is mighty good here, is that he is out and about doing other more interesting things."
"Heaven without God? I never would have thought!"
"Well, that's just the way He is. He is always up for a challenge, and I guess that minding a dead folks home is not his cup of tea."
"Then where is He?"
"Haven't a clue. Isn't that wonderful? It's ironic too, since I always thought that God is everywhere. Turns out that He has he own hangouts, just like the rest of us."
"Why yes, God is a very active entity. Always uncertain, wanting to surprise Himself. Do you know he has a personality? It's not the Jovian or Old Testament model mind you. He is an inquisitive sort, kindly, surpassingly loving, and he has a great sense of humor!"
"He sounds admirably or perhaps distressingly like a human being. Could that be a good thing?"

"Heaven knows, pardon the pun! But certainly it is a divine thing. We are after all made in His image. If we take that at face value, than God certainly is a very personable fellow, or lady if you will!"
"And so I remain here for the time being."
"You remain here as a being, the time part has no meaning."
"And where do I start?"
His mother beamed. "I thought you would never asked! Let's you and me visit your grandfather. I know he is dying to see you, or more accurately has died and want to see you! You have much to talk about!"
And so John Belden met his family tree, and all his closest kin had the fondest memories of him, and for those a bit further back on the family tree, expressed a bit of admiration for one of their own. He traveled through time and observed history from a vantage any historian would have died for, and perhaps did. At hand he was for the building of the pyramids, Alexander's conquests, Louis XIV's amours, and Mozart's concerts. He attended some of the concerts multiple times in fact, sometimes with Salieri unknowingly at his side.
And he had a grand good time, for heaven is after all known for heavenly pleasures, and in a few years' time, make that many years of good times, it all began to wane, to repeat itself. Even God is respectful of human dignity and human limitations. And so at an unknown time and at an unknown place, and despite the meaninglessness of those terms, Belden closed his eyes, and God worked again in a mysterious way.

John Belden waited in traffic impatiently. The car ahead of him was proceeding slowly, too slowly, and this was an impertinence that he could not abide. Rather than suffering

the insult from an unknown driver who was scheming, stupid, or just ill mannered, he turned his wheel sharp to the left, accelerated, and as luck would have it, he was a second too late to avoid the oncoming train, which rushed past him as he braked hard to let it pass. Regret was the emotion, not relief, as he thought that he should have reacted a bit sooner rather than fulminate in rage for the minute or so after his incidental insult. Perhaps he thought another day would bring better luck.

The 15th Voyage

The Bonfire of the Vanities

The communications officer looked at his screen, perplexed. "The world net is the nexus and repository of knowledge, everything from travel instructions to how to assemble a fusion reactor. It's critical to the life of every colony, but for this colony, it has been totally and I assume with purpose erased."

"Erased?" said Weller, astonished.

"Yes. Not destroyed or disabled, simply emptied. It is so to speak a blank slate, and this was done quite recently by my measure."

"Why would they destroy all of their knowledge? The Corynthians were a creative group, and wanted merely a simple place to contemplate and create, far from they felt Transor's distractions."

"Nonetheless, it is a fact. Their civilization, or at least its inscribed testimony, is gone. And what is more troubling is that they did this on purpose, and are entirely pleased with themselves."

"Pleased?"

"Yes, and I may add that they have informed us that they want no part of our expedition. They want us to be on our way, and to ignore them entirely."

Weller nodded. "Given the fact that they seem to think that ignorance is bliss, this does not surprise me."

Belden interjected. "What is the cause of this, religion, superstition, politics?"

"None of it as it seems. It seems to be a consensual and purely a rational decision, and these people have no radical religious or political beliefs that I can find."

"Then what?"
"We can find out by asking them. If it's not inscribed in their media, which is now lost to us, perhaps they have entrusted it to other less forgetful hands."
Weller stood back, and passively observed the planet orbiting beneath their feet. "First, their history offers a clue. These Corynthians started it all. They were the first to leave. Two thousand souls departed Transor with slight baggage. They took food processing units, some constructor bots, the complete works of the composer Amadean, and little else. Their intent was to forage not for food and shelter but for ideas. Too much knowledge was a compromising thing, and they were intent to leave as much of it behind as possible."
"Indeed, they left nearly it all," said Otillio.
"That was the plan."
"But they've created nothing since then?"
"Not exactly," said Weller. "It's not just Transor's knowledge that they have abandoned, but their own. They have erased five hundred years of their own creation, all it seems by their own choice."
"And did they respond to our transmission."
"In a fashion."
"What?"
"Frankly Captain, they don't care. They have a low ranking emissary set to meet us when we land. But even that gesture I surmise was a bother."
Weller was nonplussed. "Not surprising. After all, they left to get away from Transor's technological and cultural legacy. I am sure we're but an unpleasant reminder."
With a tap of his finger, Weller pointed to the conference display. "I think not, for their world view when they left reminds us of Transor in nearly every way. Their music,

architecture, even their games were similar to what we have on home world. But it's not a copy, merely a variation on a theme. But what they accomplished since they left Transor is a mystery to us, and with their actions, it seems they want it be a mystery to them as well."
"But they did have a template of sorts. They could avoid the mistakes and tragedies of Transor's history."
"But to achieve that by destroying the fabric of their society? That is a remedy only wars and plagues bring, and they have deliberately brought a plague among themselves."
"But with no casualties it appears."
Weller turned to Belden. "Well Belden, what do you think?"
Belden smiled sarcastically. "Actually, I'm one up on all of you! After all, I dreamt you all up in the time it took to flick a switch, and I can imagine you all would vanish when I stop thinking about you. At least for me I can show the Corinthians a thing or two. Pretty good I think for this imaginary figment you call a universe. And for these folks, if they decide to erase their legacy, it's their world, their choice, so have at it is what I say!"
Weller glared at Belden. "Well, it seems they will get their wish, no thanks to you!"
"I didn't expect any," Belden replied, smiling.
"Captain Weller," interjected Otillio. "I have received an additional transmission from the colony. The colony is set to burn, and they request us not to interfere."
"So, you are telling me that they are announcing this to us?"
"Yes, captain. And they are doing it with a sort of pride."
"Pride!" exclaimed Weller in amazement. "They are about to set fire to their world, making light of it by setting it to light! But what can we do about this? It seems they are universally intent on this."

"Perhaps so," said Weller. "But they nonetheless have granted us a meeting. I suggest we find out the madness behind their method!"

The shuttle landed on a hill on the outskirts of their main city. It was in late afternoon, yet the red glow rising from the city suggested a second dawn, but this one was terrible to contemplate. The city was on fire, and in the distance the population streamed from the city, an orderly procession of seemingly contented citizenry. They ignored Belden and Weller, save for a young lady, who walked up to greet them with a despondent look on her face.

"My name is Eleanor, I am a third ranking emissary of our nation. I'm a low level functionary of our government in its least important role, at least until now. I play act the part most of the time, as we have had no visitors until your arrival. I sent the signal to you, although all communications with outsiders if forbidden. You are not supposed to be here, yet you come at a propitious time! Did you have knowledge of what they are set to do?"

"Actually, Mr. Belden set the course and the time, although his methods are unknown even to him."

"You may say that I sort of stumble into folks like you!" Belden smiled.

"Then it is due to the grace and wisdom of God," she said with evident satisfaction and relief. "You must help me. These people are mad. They aim to destroy everything, all of our knowledge. They are going door to door, destroying all memory of our culture, every memory of our lives. They have begun with our capital city, which you can see in the distance is dissolving in flames."

"I understand your concern," said Belden sympathetically. "But what of the others? It seems that your society is in full agreement on this."

"They are misguided by their tradition," she said. "Even now they are destroying all of the great artifacts of our culture. Our temples and museums are being torn down, our roads are being demolished, our libraries burned. Is this the mark of a sane and sensible race?"

"Well, no," said Weller. "But in all of our travels we have scarcely visited a former colony that was sane and sensible. But if true, this is not the first time your people have done this. After all, they left Transor with little vestige of our world save for the works of a long dead composer."

"But you have a moral obligation," she pleaded. "Transor was never above intervening in any one's affairs if they crossed the line. You above all people save our culture."

Weller surveyed the conflagration, and looked sympathetically at Eleanor. "I wish we could," he said. "But even if we could stop them from their cultural suicide, it is against our mandate. Even the robotics laws are not violated by this. It is a tragedy yes that you are losing your heritage, but that seems to be the choice of your people."

"But it is not mine!" she said defiantly. "There are not many of us who have rebelled against them, and for those who do are options are bare. But by being here, and from a distant place, you can save our culture."

She outstretched her arm, and in the palm of her hand was a standard Transorian data cube.

"Here, I have saved our culture, a copy of our world net. This small data cube contains untold terabytes, and carries the sum total of our knowledge, our accomplishments, even the domestic conversations of our people. You must take it with you!"

Belden took the data cube, and while nodding looked apprehensively at their nearby shuttle.

There they saw two officials standing near the shuttle, accompanied by several guards with phase pistols at the ready.
"I don't think they are too happy to see us," said Weller, as the two walked up to greet them.
"You are Captain Weller I presume," said the official sternly.
"Yes, my colleague John Belden and I have arrived from Transor, as you doubtless know."
"Yes, and you come here uninvited. Nonetheless, no harm done if you leave as you came, and with no baggage I may add."
"What do you mean?"
"I mean as in the data cube the lady doubtless gave you. It is common among the dissenters to secrete them away. No matter, we can scan for them easily. I would rather of course that you simply hand it over."
Weller turned to Belden, who hunched his shoulders in ignorance.
The official turned to his assistant, who toggled the dials of a scanner, and looking up, seemed confused with the results.
"I can't pick it up," he said. Pointing to Belden, "I had registered its presence before, and in that man's hands."
"Who me?" said Belden innocently.
"Where is it?" said the man in a threatening tone. "You can't leave until you account for it. It was in your hand!"
"Well obviously not here," said Belden. "And if you know what's good for you, I think you should let us leave, and beg this poor lady to make her leave as well. If not, we could do worse than destroy you, since you are accomplishing that quite well yourselves. But we will do quite the opposite. We will restore your despised world net with one

of our own, and replace your scorched culture with another that would not be as easily erased. And no law, robotics or Transorian, can stop us."
The official fumed, and motioned to the guards, who lowered their pistols.
"Then leave, and never return. This is our affair, not yours, and I trust that when our culture blooms anew, Transor will be even a fainter memory."
"Blooms anew? You will have nothing to start from, and for what purpose, only to extinguish your culture yet again"
"When the time comes," he said proudly. "When the time comes!"
Belden and Weller nodded, and as he walked to the shuttle, Belden turned to Eleanor and whispered into her ear. She beamed in happiness as she waved them adieux.

Returning to the Nole, Belden and Weller surveyed the surface of the planet, now in the darkness of night, but lit by a thousand flashes of light.
"It's their bonfires, all of their creation, incinerated like personal and useless vanities.," said Weller sullenly. "A tragedy that it has come to this, and yet we could do nothing but observe it. But Belden, you seem strangely unaffected by this, indeed I even detect a hint of contentment."
Belden smiled. "And why not? You see Captain Weller, these people for all of their wont of destruction have failed."
"I can't see that. There is nothing left down there, and we have come back empty handed."
"In a fashion, I am here."
"And without the data cube, which you no doubt discarded."
"Yes, the cube is gone, but the knowledge is not."
"But the data are destroyed?"

"Well yes, in a fashion."
"Then what happened to it?" asked Weller testily.
"Well, since they were going to find the data cube no matter what I did, I hid it the best way I knew. I ate it."
"You ate it! But they still did not detect the cube."
Belden looked at him uncomfortably. "Well," rubbing his stomach, "I guess my digestion is as powerful as my intellect. Though I was a bit uncomfortable."
"And then what?"
"I will pass it of course."
"I don't like the thought of that," grimaced Weller. "Besides, they would have picked it up in their scans. They are very thorough in this you know. How did you get past them?"
"Well," said Belden. "My constitution is a bit different from yours as you know, and I think that goes double for my digestion."
"So the cube was destroyed."
"Yes, but I think we should look to other ways information can be passed."
"Our data banks?" said Weller.
"Yes, that's the key. We shall soon see if I am as unique as you say I am!"
Weller accessed the communications console, and with a simple verbal command called up the roster of recent upload data uploads.
"There!" he exclaimed as he pointed a blur of scrolling file on the screen. "It's their data, a thousand terabytes worth, it is the contents of their civilization, the five hundred year record of accomplishment that these people are seeking to destroy. We have the record of their entire civilization, from their arts and sciences to the historic babble of their social media, all stored and archived. But for whose posterity?

They would obviously not want it back even if we offered it to them in a thousand years."
Weller nodded passively. "The tragedy is that legacies are generally unwanted anyways. On Transor we are trying to escape ours, as we never had the courage to destroy it. It would have been easier after all to do what these people have done."
"But why do it?" asked Belden. "Why annihilate almost the entire contents of their culture?"
"A simple query will suffice," said Weller, as he entered the question on his keyboard.
The question was duly answered, and the shipboard AI responded with a simple two word answer. It was an answer obvious, depressing, and to Weller, confirmed his worst thoughts.
"The Alexandreen library, what is that?"
Weller nodded in acknowledgement. "Our AI is a parsimonious thing, or person if you may. It spares all superfluity in its responses, and considers carefully not just the question, but who is posing it."
"Then that answer was for you, and its meaning?"
"In ancient times on our world, before the invention of electronic storage, all of Transor's culture was transmitted orally, and committed to paper. The Alexandreen library was the repository of all the knowledge of our world, with a million texts stored in tidy scrolls in a magnificent tower on the coast of our continent. But it was fragilely placed. Time and ignorance eventually destroyed it. From earthquakes to the depredations of invaders and superstitious citizenry, the knowledge was all but lost. The same was true for all the other libraries scattered on our world. We have retained no more than ten percent of it, the rest was an incalculable and tragic loss. However, we have

come to realize now that it was all necessary. You see, knowledge can be a dead weight, and the greater your ignorance the greater your motivation to discover. It spurred our people to every greater accomplishment, and more. Our ignorance you see was bliss, not because we knew nothing, but because it motivated us to know everything. I fear that the same motivation drove these people to destroy their own creation, not out of superstition of callousness, but because of a need for survival."

"Survival?"

"Yes, you know the answer as well as I. We will keep their data safe, after all our electronic memory is infinite. For our personal memories however, we shall with the Corinthyians let it pass into forgetfulness, as we do now and for sanity's sake nearly all the knowledge of the world."

A Game of Fizzbin

Rules of Fizzbin

Every person gets six cards, except for the player on the right, and only when the second player to their left doesn't have anyone to their right, then they're disqualified, but only if the second card is turned up on Friday and isn't a Jack, making the person to their immediate right have to deal them an additional face-down card, in which they get to show their hand unless it's Tuesday. In the case it isn't, the third player right from the dealer gets disqualified unless they have someone to their immediate left who hasn't gotten any face cards, in which case they're need a King and a 7 to be able to get another card, unless it's dark out and isn't raining, then they'll have to give back the last card as they go. But the odds of getting a Royal Fizzbin are astronomical; uncomputed even.

Belden had explained the rules to his partners, but instead of getting a pass on his invitation, they surprised and dismayed him by professing to understand them and accepting his challenge. So he was stuck with this ridiculous game whose rules he would have to make up as he went along. Captain Weller and Lieutenants Otillio and Hof sat at the card table, all curious yet surprisingly confident. Belden smiled contentedly, knowing that his intuition, luck, imagination, smarts, and of course, a willingness to make up the rules would ensure him victory.

The game unfolded badly for Belden, as Weller struck a half fizzbin quickly, and Hof claimed a royal fizzbin that Belden with some relief disqualified because it was not Tuesday. Belden was down by ten chips, and hoped for a squork to even the odds, but Weller called a break in the action to attend to an incoming transmission from Transor. Otillio

excused himself for a moment, leaving the others alone, and Belden imagining more ridiculous rules to turn the advantage towards his favor.
"Well, shall we resume the game?" asked Weller.
"But Otillio has not returned," said Belden.
Weller looked at Belden curiously. "But who is this Otillio? Is this some sort of new rule?"
Belden shook his head in surprise. "He is our communications officer! He left just for a few minutes. Can't you see the cards….."
Belden looked at Otillio's place, and his cards and chips were gone, as was his chair.
"Alright, where did you put his cards?"
"What cards? There are only the three of us playing."
"Three? Surely you mean four, we have been playing all this time.'
Belden stared at the two men, who had blank looks of bewildered innocence in their faces. He was however not convinced. "Lt. Hof, why don't you go to the bridge and find the whereabouts of Otillio. You are playing games with me and I don't like it."
Hof slammed his cards on the table. "Rather than play this stupid game, I'd be pleased! I'll leave for a spell, and you can summon that Lt. Otillio for yourself for eternity, for he doesn't exist."
Hof left in a rush, and slammed the door behind him.
Belden turned to Weller. "Serves him right, and you too Captain Weller. Play a trick on me will you? We will see who is right when Hof and Otillio come back contrite and embarrassed. They just don't want to lose the game, that's all."

Weller looked at Belden confusedly. “What are you talking about? It’s just been you and me playing your silly game. Who are these people you are referring to?”
Belden bit his lip in frustration. “So it’s you too? I think you are carrying this joke a bit too far. Hit the intercom, call them to the room. Let’s put an end to this charade!”
Weller looked at Belden as if he were mad. “I will not!” he exclaimed. “You can go look for the yourself, and while you’re at it, bring me a unicorn!”
Belden smiled meanly at Weller. “Then I will,” he uttered.
Belden left the room and angrily entered the bridge. He looked about the deck, and shouted out for all to hear. “Ok, where are Lieutenants Otillio and Hof? I know they are around here somewhere.”
A bridge officer turned to him and asked in confusion. “What are you talking about, there are no such people in our crew.”
Belden now worked himself into a rage. “Oh? And has Captain Weller put you up to this?”
“And who is Captain Weller?” asked the crewman.
“That does it!” said Belden angrily. “Then I will get him for you, and we will put an end to this nonsense once and for all!”
Belden stormed into the meeting room, and looking at the table saw no one. Worse, the cards were gone. It was as if no one was ever there.
A clever trick, Belden thought to himself. They are just angry with having to put up with my made up game. I will show them!
Belden left the room, and accosted the first crewman he saw with the question, where were the Captain and the lost lieutenants?

The crewman recoiled at the ardent and angry question. “I have no idea what you are talking about sir. There are no such people on this ship.”
“What,” shouted Belden, now almost at the end of his wits. “Ship’s computer, that’s it!” he said to himself. “I can locate them in a second!”
Rushing to his study, the monitor lit up immediately at his command. “Where are Captain Weller and Lieutenants Otillio and Hof if you please?”
Immediately, the computer responded. “There are no such individuals on this ship.”
“What? Do even the computers on this ship conspire? Where are these people?”
“Please rephrase your question,” came the response.
Belden knocked over the computer with the palm of his hand. “Damn machines! I should never have thought up this stupid game! He took an glass figurine from the table and threw it at the wall. Existence, it is all a trick, all made up, like my game, with rules that change in every dimension, infinitely, endlessly. I should never, I should never……”
Yeoman Darius Goodgion walked by the crewmen’s quarters when he heard the crash of an object. He opened the door to the cabin, and looked about an empty room. Strange he thought, I thought I heard something. No matter, perhaps it was in an adjoining room. As it is, this one is empty, except for some furniture and odd statuary and paintings. Mustn’t touch anything though, he thought. He closed the door, and left for the next occupant to sort it out, leaving alone a broken figurine in the corner of the room.

The 16th Voyage

Weller in Wonderland

Personal log, star date 1520,1.4.
I am dictating this entry while sitting on a creaky bed in a bedroom in a large home in some mythical city conjured up by my inexplicable companion, Mr. Belden. It is called Tallahassee, and it is both beautiful and strange. Tallahassee is a lovely name, but fantasy cities usually have names that flow off the tongue. I look from this second story room at a large fenced yard full of flowers and tall trees. It is like a forest in Transor, yet it is the personal garden of a private home, Belden's home. Of course, on our world forests are public places, but here they are often part of private domains. This world is as eccentric and confusing as Belden's character, but it is also good humored and kind enough, and that too reflects the man, or what purports to be one.
This was an unexpected voyage, and this world is uncharted and unknown to me, except of course to Mr. Belden, who insisted that I make the journey. Getting here however was unusual for me, but the preferred or should I say obligated mode of travel for Belden. I will go to sleep soon, and this is my report. Hopefully, in my sleep I will pass to the Nole as quietly and peacefully as Belden. I have newfound respect for Belden, and am a bit sad for him too, as I will explain.
It was only yesterday that Belden approached me on the Nole with his latest brainstorm. He expressed a certain disbelief in our travels, hoping to show me that reality had to have a different if more mundane face. I told him again that although he had the right to disbelieve our reality, he

had to understand why I had to disbelieve his. He nonetheless insisted that he show me his world, and came up with a plan of simple yet uncertain merit.

He explained to me how he had made the transit to our world, and it was his conjecture that Ariel had mapped his mind, his neural image, and transposed it to a new world of her infinite imagining. Transor had long ago developed the technology to map the human mind, but it was for diagnostic, medical purposes, and hardly designed to create a working mirror image of the mind. Nonetheless, Belden insisted that we employ our device, and port my neural image to the black box that was the governing AI, or as he called his guardian angel, Ariel. I would pass to sleep, and then I would be transported to Belden's world, or at least that was the plan. The device mapped my neural activity, and from there it was a simple matter to map 'me', my consciousness or mind to this rendered world. The mapping was done quickly and painlessly, but strange enough when it was completed I opened my eyes to this world, and all without a moment's sleep.

I woke up on a bed in the second story of Belden's family home. I could hear Belden snoring in an adjoining bedroom, and decided not to rouse him from his slumber. It would be more fitting that I act the part of an explorer, without a guide but with a necessary sense of adventure, even though this by his account would be a very safe place.

I walked about the street in the morning. I was surprised that I could read the street signs. I was pleased to see that AI bestowed auto-translate as it does for Belden, and I would expect I would have equal fluency in their language. I wondered what great capabilities it has given me. The houses were grand affairs, multi-storied with large windows, gabled roofs, and about them all were well kept

gardens and moss laden trees whose branches shaded the streets. There were no walkways, so I walked on the streets, and here I had my first brush with death, and the tardy realization that even safe environments have their hazards. The cars are set on wheels, and do not hover as they do on Transor, and only after dodging a few was I to realize that they were not automated as on our world. They are under the control of humans, a hazardous and inefficient way of controlling such dangerous machines, as I found out while dodging one after another of the contraptions.

It was disappointing to see that this city was not made for pedestrians, as even a short walk required a motorized vehicle. The walk ways, if they were to be called that, were merely parking lots for their vehicles. I assumed that there did not seem to be many people living in the city, or perhaps they keep to themselves, hiding as it were. Auto cars zoomed about, but the streets are absent of people. They should come out from their seclusion, not a healthy tradition it would seem. Perhaps I thought the people were congregating in special places where, like on Transor, they could debate philosophical points, discuss topical issues, and gather to participate in role play. I saw across the highway an immense single story building with a parking space filled with vehicles. Here it seemed would be the likely place where the people could congregate to talk, debate, and pair off to pursue their personal dramas.

With much trepidation and a little luck I made it across the busy highway. The forum was an immense building with automated doors and a large sign affixed above them that said 'Wal-Mart Superstore'. As I entered the large automatic door I was greeted immediately by a fat old woman with a badge identifying her as an 'associate'. "Welcome to Wal-Mart!," she said in an almost mechanical voice. A brightly

lit space filled with row upon row of items from food to clothing was more akin to a warehouse than a store or a forum, it served several purposes at once as I was later to discover. The attendees to such a marvelous space were called 'Wal-Mart shoppers'. For such an apparently rich world, it was sad they appeared to be mainly poor and diseased. Many of them wore ill-fitting clothing, and looked decrepit and obese. Vanity did not become them, nor did shame discourage them, and it was astonishing that they would embarrass themselves to attend this place in such a state, yet they seemed somewhat accepting and proud of their condition. Many of the men wore shirts with large numbers on the back and names like Brees and Manning. No doubt these were the last names of some of the more well-known clans who live in the city. Although the children looked as thin, sweet and pretty as on Transor, they contrasted remarkably with their plump and disheveled parents, who seemed worn and tired.

Apart from the people, other sights were more familiar and refreshing. In the front corner of the Wal-Mart was a wide buffet of fresh fruit and vegetables of all types. I walked the aisles of this 'produce' section, sampling as I went the delicious fruits that for some reason the other people refrained from partaking. A reason perhaps why their health seemed so parlous. It seemed that at each row and corner of the place was a stall with scrumptious tidbits, samplers doubtless of the local culinary art. I had the opportunity to partake of portions of pasta, nugget like portions of chicken, and was particularly enamored by something called spicy 'Doritos', a crispy confection unlike anything I had eaten in Transor.

Although the Wal-Mart was not quite like our forum, there were helpful guides to show me their ways. They called

themselves 'Wal-Mart Associates'. They were a quite friendly lot, and were quick to volunteer their knowledge and advice. I asked a friendly associate where I could gather with others for matters of discussion, entertainment, and role play, and with a broad smile she pointed me to a section of the forum call the 'electronics' section. Located in the rear of the forum, the back wall of electronics section was covered with numerous view screens of all sizes. The screens were interactive in only the most rudimentary sense, and hand held 'remote controls' were employed to shuffle between various forms of canned entertainment. I was told by an eager associate that the people of this world wiled away their spare hours in front of these screens in supine contentment while 'surfing' from one program to the next, and 'binging' on multiple episodes at a time for newly introduced programs.

This all seemed much too passive to me, and I inquired if there should be some way I could participate more fully in the enfolding dramas presented on these screens. Without further ado, she introduced me to what they called a 'gaming console', a device with a program of some rudimentary intelligence that could interact with me, or my avatar. Alas, the extent of my participation was limited not to my voice or intelligence, but to my most basic reflexes, namely my thumbs. Their conception of interactivity was to sit in front of a big display screen, and interact with 3 d images through nothing more than twiddling your fingers on some swiveling stick, or as they called it, a joy-stick. With such a device, I was assured that I would find my joy while moving and stroking the stick, and doubtless some colored buttons to its side as well. While fiddling with the joystick, it was my avatar and not me who was getting the workout, learning the lesson, and rescuing the damsel in distress. All

I could do was just watch, admire, and imperfectly identify with my projected self. I was assured by the associate that I would relax, just sit there as it were, with no running and jumping required. I remarked to her that one could cut down on one's daily nutrient requirements with this. I noted that their bodies would surely atrophy if they spent all their hours with these entertainments. With a broad smile, she reassured me that they had available at the Wal-Mart all sorts of snacks and condiments you could eat while you battle monsters, space aliens, and virtually wander strange new worlds. In her opinion, one could work up quite an appetite in his or her adventures. I looked at the associate, who was as round as a ball, and from what I could see, wholly typical of the denizens of this place. I realized in an instant that perhaps that was the reason why these 'Wal-Mart shoppers' seemed so ill. Squatting in front of a view screen for hours on end with nothing but the exertion of one's thumbs and fingers on a remote control or joy stick would doubtless cause one's physique and health to atrophy, as what appeared to be the case for most of the poor souls who ambled about the place. I feared also that their mentality would likely decay as well if the only decision to be pondered was what virtual weapon to shoot or what inane game show to watch. I muttered that such a lifestyle would be like being among the walking dead. Hearing this, an alert associate pointed me to a disc of the TV show of the same name, a show I would doubtless surmise is about decaying people as well.

I returned to Belden's home, somewhat disappointed in this Tallahassee. Although it was a place of wonderful beauty, it seemed that its population preferred a solitary life in front of a view screen. At least they had those delicious Doritos to keep them company.

Belden laughed at my reservations about this place, and assured me that people actually did spend their hours away from home, and he had just the right remedy to my ennui. It was called a college football game, and in honor of my magical appearance in this place, he had acquired two tickets for us to this sporting contest.

This Florida State University was Belden's alma mater, and reminded me of the universities on Transor, except of course that our education was virtual, whereas students followed the charming but old fashioned tradition of attending classes with real and not projected teachers. It was a shady campus, but sad to say there were many homeless people who were camping out all around, cooking on crude stoves on the back of their vehicles, and drinking copious amounts of intoxicating substances to relieve their pain that Belden told me was called 'beer'.

In the distance was a grand stadium where this contest was to take place, streams of people were walking from all directions to the stadium.

Positioned on a high pedestal before the entrance to the stadium was a rearing horse bestrode by what appeared to be one of the primordial natives of this place. The native looked forward with stern ferocity, and carried a spear with a razor sharp edge that was capped by a live flame that rippled in the wind. Belden told me that he was called a 'Seminole', a proud race of warriors that I was assured were never defeated. We were to see the sporting namesakes of these people, who were remarkably, and for the most part, also undefeated. The crowd was coursing into the stadium, eager with anticipation for the contest to come.

As I entered the stadium with Belden, I saw another statue, but this one was a familiar face. It was Commodore Bowdan, the legendary space commander of the Nole, who

assembled and led the Nole's crews to numerous victories and championships in the games. The bronze statue caught him in stride, pointing ahead as if giving directions to perhaps, the gardener? Wearing a lose fitting cap, polo shirt, and baggy pants, he was a stunning contrast to the mighty equestrian statue that bore his namesake on Transor, in splendid military attire, holding a sword on a rearing mount, his countenance stern, resolute and commanding. Obviously, commanders held a more indifferent status on this world. As we entered the stadium, it was quite an impressive site. Rows upon rows of seats scaled upwards in a cavernous enclosure, like an immense bowl. On opposite ends of this stadium were large electronic billboards bright with images of statistics, rotating helmets, and simulated fireworks. Belden informed me that there were easily seventy thousand people in this place. We sat on a high seat on something called the forty yard line. The adversaries in this sporting contest soon trotted out and began exercising in the field. The Florida State team wore outfits of garnet and gold, and with their padded knees and shoulders, their bodies appeared to be swollen like balloons. Their opponents, whose team was presumably named after some unnamed nobleman called Duke, were in jerseys of bright blue. The players wore what appeared to be motorcycle helmets with elaborate face guards, and decorated on the Florida State helmet was the edge of a rising spear that resembled the insignia that graced the hull of the Nole. As the stadium filled with people, the crowd would in unison arch the side of their hands from the elbows down and up in a motion that Belden told me was the Seminole chop, representing how Seminole warriors of yore would implant an axe in their opponents heads. This encouragement to the team,

although of violent origin, mimicked the more noble salute of our Nole faction in the games that did not signify such violence.

The game commenced, much to my fascination and confusion, after a Seminole on a warhorse implanted a flaming spear in the middle of the field, a rude taunt to be sure. After a 'kick off' when the ball was booted high into the air towards the opposing team, the game got interesting as well as confusing. Both teams it appeared would simply collide, and afterwards take pause for a few minutes and a 'commercial'. Then they would regroup and collide again, with the ball carrier crushed under a pile of members of the opposing team. Belden informed me that a member of the team who advanced an oblong ball a few yards would gain credit after ten yards were gained in less than four tries, and would have four more tries or 'downs', with the ultimate goal of reaching the end of the field of end zone. Sometimes the player in back of the line, who was much thinner than the players in front of him, would seem to panic and throw the ball downfield as if to rid himself of the thing before he was tackled. Belden assured me that this was not panic, or at least most of the time, and that this 'quarterback' was trying to throw the ball to another team member, who upon receiving the ball would dodge and weave towards the end zone. He told me about marching down the field, of long bombs, of offenses and defenses, all in martial and military metaphors for an exercise that was anything but. The bomb thing confused and alarmed me. I asked him, what is this long bomb? I see no explosion, can this football come armed? It was only after he explained to me at length that these were mere metaphors that I became at ease. In the end, winning the game was easy for the Seminoles, and although the noble Duke team was 'crushed' by a score of 44 to

nothing, they took their defeat in stride, and voiced no complaint.

We returned to Belden's home, and I was too tired to raise all of my questions about this place. The city of Tallahassee nestled in a larger state of Florida, which was a part of the even larger political entity called the United States. It seemed to me to suffer from good intentions that were not exactly thought through. They were content in their pleasures but ignorant of better and more refined and edifying entertainments. They were an imperfect people, but perhaps this was for the best, as perhaps the hope of perfecting oneself is better than perfection itself.

And so ended my day at the strange, disappointing, yet often wonderful place called Tallahassee. It was a place that would be interesting to repeatedly visit, in spite of the fact that these Americans were a most illogical if well-meaning sort. They could learn much from Transor, but whether that would serve them for good or ill was hard to tell. The night was upon us, and I ascended the stairs to my room, and hence to bed on my squeaky mattress in my sparely furnished little bedroom, and felt as comfortable as if I was truly at home.

Weller sat in the command chair on the bridge, and contemplated the stars ahead. Belden walked to his side with an anxious smile.

"So what did you think? Do you believe me now, of the reality of my world?" he said with an air of anticipation and pride.

Weller looked at him sympathetically. "I had a good night's sleep, and little more. I am afraid that your AI failed to make my little journey."

"But you were there! I was with you!" exclaimed Belden in frustration.
"Sorry," said Weller sympathetically. "But I recall a comfortable and brief nap, and little more. If I did travel to your world it was unbeknownst to me."
Belden could not hide his disappointment. "I don't know what to say! The transfer worked, but obviously your memory of these events was not retrieved."
"And I am not surprised!" said Weller. "The machine can map my neural activity, but it cannot imprint memories. It is beyond its capabilities, and it seems your AI has no interest in expanding them either. What you were dealing with was my neural clone, a representation of me, that's all."
Belden was unfazed. "A representation yes," he insisted. "But if that is true, he is still in the machine, he must be in the machine. And if he was your clone, he must still be you. What is not shared is the memory, and I fear that it will divide your consciousness."
"That's an interesting notion," said Weller. "A clone of me, embedded in AI, for all I know sleeping at present, and perchance dreaming of its fine full day of traveling with you in your world? But because its memory is not shared, perhaps its consciousness is in the machine as well. But maybe it doesn't dream at all, and when it opens its eyes again it will be on your world. But if not Tallahassee, then where? And if so, will this alternate 'me' long to return to the Nole when he recognizes he cannot, or can my latest memories be exported to him, to update his consciousness as it were, to let him feel safe at home even when I know he will never return? I don't know about you, but these questions are making me a bit dizzy!"

Belden nodded in resignation. “I guess I will have to make the best of it, even though I can never hope to understand it. At least with me I can seamlessly pass between worlds with my consciousness somewhat intact.”

“Perhaps,” said Weller, smiling. “But who knows if there are not infinite copies of you in infinite universes making the same conclusion, as our best theories predict.”

Belden hunched his shoulders in resignation. “Then if the AI doesn’t give you the memory of your trip, allow me to provide it for you, second hand.”

“By all means!” said Weller agreeably.

And so Belden talked with Weller until the simulated night, recounting Weller’s behavior, his reactions, his smiles and wonderment. And as he recalled each moment in such detail and with telling empathy, Weller began to imagine ever so slightly that he was indeed present in such a place, and wished, just like his earnest companion, to believe.

The Algorithm

Belden's garage study was a simple place. A cavernous room with red carpet, paintings, bookcases full of sheet music, books, and papers, and sleeping cats. Its upright piano was the only remnant of its original purpose as a music studio. Now he worked here alone, and thought of better times when the room was punctuated with the laughter of children and the sound of music.

His family was gone now. Off to Russia, to a better future, certainly a sterner, more demanding one. Belden never had the disciplined mind of his former wife, who expected her children to rise to the standards of a difficult and unforgiving world, and was equally harsh in her discipline and violent in a temperament that would brook no dissent. Perhaps it was a cultural thing, but Belden was of another mind. He would prefer to indulge his daughters, as if their moments whim signaled a deeper wisdom than his. Now his own wisdom had come to naught, as his wife, of ex-wife as the divorce documents proclaimed, decided that it was for a better purpose that children remained with her.

And now he was alone, without a permanent job, without a family, the lonely master of a large and vacant house. He was lucky to procure a few contract programming jobs, but these barely kept the lights on in the house. The quiet was maddening, and he would at terms orate to himself like an actor making a Shakespearean aside, proclaiming a vision here, an argument there, or observing a simple irony in a past or future perceived, and always the dramatic and tragic figure in the play of life.

He noticed from outside the window to his study a small figure approach on a bicycle. It was a small girl, no more

than nine years. She rapped on the pane of the wide glass door. Belden opened the door and smiled down on her.
"Can Claire come out to play?" she said in a sweet and shy voice.
"I am afraid that Claire is not here today, she is out of town. Would you like to come in for a minute and leave her a note? I am sure she would love to hear from you!"
"Ok," she said, and as she walked in Belden fetched her a paper and pencil. She took the items and sat down at his desk to write a note to her friend. In a few minutes she was finished, and she placed the pen down and neatly folded her note and gave it to Belden.
"You make sure she gets this."
"Of course," said Belden.
"Mr. Belden," she asked as she looked about the cavernous room. "What do you do here alone, I mean when your family is gone?"
"Read and write for the most part, but mainly I imagine things."
"Oh I like to imagine too!" she said. "Claire and I love to do this. We just want to try new things, and make believe makes it easy. It is so much fun to play with her you know. I love her big doll house so much. We play with our Barbies and imagine them doing different things, being different people."
"So you like to play make believe games."
"Sure," she said. "Everything else is so boring. It is fun to pretend to be someone else, even if they are just a doll. Because then you can do new things all the time."
"So the doll is a place holder for you, for what makes you happy. It's an algorithm as it were."
"What does an all-go-ri-them mean?" she asked.

Belden smiled. “I am sorry my dear, it’s just a fancy word. It’s what I call a cipher, just a way of making a long argument short, or in your case and my case even, it just describes what it means to be alive.”
“You mean to have fun?”
“I guess you can say that,” said Belden. “Yes, I think you are right. Out of the mouth of babes you might say!”
Belden looked ahead, lost in thought, and the little girl smiled at him, and turned and walked back to her bicycle.
“Thank you Mr. Belden! And please tell Claire to call me when she comes back. It will be so much fun to play with her again!”
“Of course,” said Belden, as he smiled at her and waved goodbye.
John Belden looked at the little girl as she rode her bicycle away. Her idea of happiness was so simple, so easy, and in the near future unattainable for her and all her kind. It was the grandest irony nature could foist on the grand hubris of humankind, that when ultimate power is attained, all of its fruits become certain. Human beings were not made to deal with certainties, that was the Faustian bargain that nature gave them in exchange for the motive to become lords of creation. Maybe the solution was to play with proxies, with dolls, and lose one’s identity in the new born life of another, of animating a bit of plastic. The future perceived, just a nest of doll houses, one enclosing the other, animated by nameless minds simply wanting to have fun.

The 17th Voyage

Eloi

"Now *this* is a beautiful world!" exclaimed Weller with an pronounced air of satisfaction. When the Eloi left Transor centuries ago, they wanted to create an idyllic world of beauty, peace, and tranquility where they could meditate among flowers and languid brooks."

"It certainly seems the case." said Belden. "The terraformers have done their work well. It fits the recipe they were given. This place is an immaculate park, with trees, brooks, and flowers all in perfect proportion. It's like a golf course without putting greens. But you know we observed no cities or any of the infrastructure of civilization before we landed. All that exists seems to be these parks and a few rock outcroppings."

Weller smiled. "But there was no need for it! The Eloi were vegetarians, and had simple non materialist needs. They would only need to pick fruit off the trees, relax, and contemplate the stars. It's not a bad way to spend your days, don't you think?"

"It you were a cretin that is." Belden huffed. "Hanging around ponds and munching on fruit is the way of a mindless herbivore, not a human. Such things are necessary for a respite for life, not a substitute for it."

"Well, it's their way, and we have to respect them for it."

Belden raised his hands in exasperation. "Respect what? They disconnected their world net long ago, and we have no reason to suspect that they are even educated. Heaven knows that in their adulation of simplicity a little book learning was a dangerous thing."

Weller smiled confidently. “I think you are a bit too pessimistic about these people. You will find them gentle, hospitable, and intelligent, just wait and see!”

Belden looked at his quadcorder, and pointed to a grove in the distance. “Over there is a clutch of them. It seems they are hanging around a pond, and from what I read, they are barely moving.”

“Excellent,” said Weller. “It will be a delight to meet them, and even you will be satisfied!”

In a few minutes, the pair reached the pond. The Eloi numbered thirty or so, and lounged about the pond and the languid stream that fed it. They wore white robes of sheer fabric, and lay about quietly, with the only sound or movement being the occasional splash of their feet in the water. They were beautiful, childlike people who took no notice of the visitors as they approached. But to Belden and Weller, there was something terribly wrong with the wrong with this pastoral scene.

“By God, Weller, they are three feet tall!” exclaimed Belden. “And they obviously don’t notice us, even when we are amidst them. They are just lying about, like in some Greek idyll.”

Suddenly, an Eloi fell into the stream, and although the current was gentle and only waist deep for the creature, it flailed and screamed as it was slowly swept away. The others took no heed of it, and remained lying about in supine contentment. Weller quickly stepped to the stream bank and grabbed its arm, lifting it like a soggy child’s doll. The Eloi looked at its rescuer, and without a smile ran back to the group.

“Appreciative, aren’t they?” said Belden with a cynical smile.

"I don't understand." said Weller in a bewildered tone. "These people seemed to have devolved into these mindless and helpless creatures. But why?"
"Or better yet, how?" asked Belden.
"We record no presence of bots here. There are no robotic helpers, no automation in any way. They just came to this state through natural evolution, a remarkable and perhaps lucky achievement I think."
Belden was unconvinced. "Well, something or someone helped them. A people with no ambition except savoring the day cannot survive even a fortnight without assistance in some way."
Weller threw his hands up in the air in frustration. "Well, they have! They eat fruit, lay around, and devolved in time into three foot tall infants, sounds easy enough to me!"
Belden raised his hand to respond, only to be interrupted by the sudden wail of a siren in the distance. It was like an air raid siren, and this time the Eloi took notice. They stood as one, and turning to the east they slowly walked silently in single file down a path to the forest below.
"Where are they going?" asked Weller in surprise.
"Frankly, I don't care, however I do think we will have a few answers revealed to us presently."
Weller and Belden followed the Eloi as they slowly walked to the siren's call, and soon in a glen saw what appeared to be a large sculpted head, a sphinx like gateway whose dark maw opened to allow the Eloi to walk in.
Belden grimaced, half in apprehension, and half in glee. "We have blasters of course, and I have a life that can survive whatever monsters we find in there, and I assure you, I think we will find some! Are you ready for your next adventure Captain Weller?"

Weller was unmoved. “Very funny, but I am not concerned. We come armed, are in full contact with the Nole, and whatever we find in there is certainly not expecting us.”
The two men entered the sphinx, and after they crossed into the cave, the jaw of the sphinx closed shut with a shudder.
“Rats, now we’re trapped!” exclaimed Belden.
“I’m not concerned,” said Weller. These Eloi have obviously made this trip many times. I am sure we have nothing to fear.”
The cave was dim, with barely enough light to walk unaided. The Eloi continue to traipse ahead, seemingly unconcerned with what lay ahead of them. Weller saw a path to the right that shimmered with the light of a fire, and motioned Belden to follow him.
“I smell something, do you?” asked Belden.
“Yes, it seems to be roasted meat of some kind.”
“But didn’t you tell me there were no livestock or wild game on this planet, and that these Eloi were vegetarians?”
“It appeared to be, but perhaps we are not dealing just with the Eloi. Look, in the corner is a pile of bones. I hope this is not what I’m thinking it is.”
Belden nodded as if he had seen this before. “The Eloi, raised as livestock? This is a hideous prospect. For us on Earth it was a fictional tale. But here? How could…”
Weller motioned to Belden as a sound rustled in the distance. “We will soon find out. Ready your blaster. I don’t like the looks or smell of this place.”
The shadow approached, and soon was filled with the form of a large man, dressed in a crude tunic. He was of a ruddy complexion, with a large jaw, full beard, and piercing black eyes that after opening wide in moments surprise, lit up along with a broad smile.

"Well, well, visitors from afar! You must be from Transor. We detected your ship earlier, but didn't expect you'd be visiting us so quickly. Mike Morlock is the name. Glad to see you!" He walked to a nearby refrigerator, and grabbed a bottle that he poured into a large mug. He held the mug to his lips and guzzled down half the glass. He smacked his lips and smiled. "Would you like a brew?"

Belden and Weller lowered their pistols. "No, thank you," said Weller. "Your existence is a surprise. We thought that the Eloi were the only inhabitants of this place. You didn't, you couldn't..."

Mike looked at his guests with a hearty and wry smile, as if guessing the irony. "Oh, they're fine. They are taking a nap right now. They are sleeping in bunk beds six flights high. Don't want the little buggers to stay out at night. They tend to wander into the waters or into the forest and get drowned or lost. They are delicate creatures you know!"

"But what happened to them? They were not always these mindless idiots."

Mike laughed. "You mean *mindful* idiots. It's their belief system you see, just be mindful of the present, and dwell not for a second on the past. If gives you peace of mind, but unfortunately it robs you *of* a mind. They never acknowledged that living well requires its portion of suffering, all the better for the accentuating the pleasures that follow. Life is like a beating heart, it has its ups and downs, its own rhythm, but these Eloi valued a flat line, which to us is death, and to them…"

"A living death, like the pleasant repast of our heaven," said Belden.

"Bingo!" laughed Mike as he pointed his finger at Belden.

"To each his own, I suppose, as I suppose that for every living and vibrant mind there are a million mindless

daffodils whom it must tend to. Reason enough for us to be I would think!"
"So they kept you as a handy man?"
"Yes. They didn't trust the bots, better they thought to have servants of flesh and blood. They just didn't reckon that even in well planned societies, evolution finds a way to change the appearances of the world."
"And you've kept hidden all this time."
"Oh yes, we have kept in the shadows. It's part of our job. Hasn't done much I'd say to improve our looks, yet we are beautiful to each other, if not similar to our family pictures of decades ago."
"But you came from the same place on Transor."
"Not exactly. You know that even Transor has its ethnic groups. We were from the central valley, the Eloi came from the Frisco province. We were always adopted to farming, industry, manual labor you might say. The Eloi were different. They were the intellectual class, and given Frisco's dynamic, quite an effete one I would say. Even though they were a bright bunch, they didn't care much for heavy lifting. That's why we came along."
"But you also evolved to look so different, and the Eloi?"
"Well, time and circumstance have a way of shaping folks. Lounging by ponds and meditating on flower buds doesn't shape the future of the race, unless the future is a world of infantile adults. In this case they are not adults but dolts. We accept it. After all, they gave us the chance to move here, be on our own without interference. All we had to do was give them their daily meal of veggies and fruit, and tuck them in at night. After that, we were free to watch our ball games, laugh and tussle with our friends, and swig beer."
"But where do you do that? We have seen nothing on the planet but gardens and trees."

"In our underground warrens of course. The Eloi wanted their garden world unspoiled by our rude habits, and so we have left the surface world to them. For us, we live below, and we grow our own meat, veggies, fruit, and spirits from the same in vitro farming long developed on Transor, even down to those delicious ribs I might say!"
Weller surveyed the cave with a dour expression. "So you live in a dungeon while the Eloi repose in your homespun Eden?"
Mike let out a loud and bellowing laugh. "Dungeon? I beg to differ! This is just my home away from home, my man cave. I am a caretaker, I am here just to make sure the little people don't hit their heads, fall or get into other mishaps. They are as dumb as turkeys you know. I've seen some that in a rainstorm open their mouths as they look in to the sky, and nearly drown! As for here, it's just your typical man cave, but it has a lot of room, TV screens, and a plenty of munchies! But I'm in the countryside, in a manner of speaking. Three miles down we've got entire cities with all the amenities, complete with a sunny 3-d sky!"
"And you've let these people devolve into these creatures, and done nothing to stop it."
Mike shook his head. "It was in their charter, and we obey the rules. Besides, our people have evolved in our own way too, and have made up for the Eloi deficiencies by turning into a very nice race of people. You should come down and have an extended visit some time!"
Weller smiled. "Thanks, but perhaps another time. But one final question. These Eloi are continuing to evolve. Will you be there to serve them as they become stupider and more helpless?"
Mike took a hand to his chin and stroked his beard. "Well, if a had a time machine, I can envision their future. Furry

little rabbits like I see it, with big eyes, small brains, and a penchant for laying around. Still wouldn't eat them though, too bony! And for you folks on Transor, what are you evolving to?"

Weller looked at Mike and smiled wistfully. "That, my friend, is the question that we seek to answer."

The 18th Voyage

The Burning Bush

"No world net?" said Belden, somewhat surprised.
"And no AI, anywhere," said Otillio. That was the plan. They wanted a natural evolution of their culture, and they wanted it to come at a slow pace. The world net and AI would have accelerated too rapidly their advance, and made them a copy of Transor within decades. Their solution was to find respite from such artificial stimulants for progress."
"Hmm, I get it," said Belden. "So instead of email, they had snail mail, and rummaging through bound books in a library replaced an internet search. And I presume as well that they walked or bicycled to work?"
"Yes, as a matter of fact they did," said Weller. "But they weren't anti-technology, they just preferred a different pace to deal with it. It wasn't in their charter to regress, only to be more leisurely in their cultural and technological evolution. They were not strangers to technology, nor did they disdain it, but this place is rudimentary by all standards. We are dealing with people who are just emerging their bronze age. And now there is nothing. A few small communities of primitive means are all that remains, spanning the great valley which comprises the most habitable part of their world."
"What happened?"
"I don't know. There are no records. It's as if they wanted to expunge all knowledge of their history, and even of their original reason for coming to this place."

"It's strange, It seems however that this opinion changed when they reached this place."
"But where do we start to communicate with them if their society has passed to such a rudimentary state?"
"I would suggest that we simply land out of sight, but near their biggest building in their largest village," said Otillio. "It probably fulfills a ceremonial function, such as government or religious. Either way, it is our best bet in order to meet who's in charge. I also recommend that you keep your phase pistols at the ready. Who knows how these people will treat with visitors from the stars."

The shuttle craft landed before dawn, and as the community roused from their sleep they discovered an unlikely duo in their town square. The natives were a shy lot, and retired in confusion until one figure stood forward. He was a tall man in white robes, serene in his demeanor, and obviously pleased to see the visitors.
"Welcome to Chaldya," he said as he outstretched his hand. "I am Jerem, the high priest here. Your arrival has been foretold, and we are delighted to see you. You are here to redeem us, our savior gods, but you know that of course. The others will come out and greet you gladly when they know your origins and intent."
"I appreciate your greeting and your generosity," said Weller. "But we are not savior gods. We come from Transor, the home world of your ancestors. Surely your records…"
"Our records were destroyed in the great flood. But this did not impair of knowledge, our trust in our recollection of the past. We have assembled them into our holy scriptures, and they have validated themselves by predicting that you would be here. We need no further proof."

Belden took Weller aside and whispered to Weller. "Obviously their memory is pretty selective, and this is just a coincidence I am sure."

Weller nodded and turned to Jerem. "It's nice to know that we were predicted through your sacred texts, but do they give any inkling of your history and how your society came to be?"

"Yes," said Jerem. We have legends of our past, and many that predate our scriptures. It was a glorious time. We came from the stars you know, and our race, our accomplishments were magnificent. But we were cast out of our paradise. We were too proud, and sinned against God. And so the earth opened up an swallowed our cities, the remnants were consumed by fire and flood."

"Your culture was destroyed!" said Belden, astonished. "That is unbelievable. But could have been a natural event, a catastrophe that you could not have predicted."

"But it was predicted!" said Jerem with renewed earnestness. "Although the great flood was unannounced by God, for the succeeding catastrophes our deity has warned us as if to confirm His retribution for our sins. Over centuries, our prophets have come down from the mountain, and told us to the hour and minute when the cataclysms would occur."

"But that's impossible," said Weller. "You can't do that with your level of sophistication. There must be something else. Are you sure all of your technology was destroyed? I reason there must be some technology your prophets accessed."

"Technology? No, our people would have noticed it and brought it down. The mountains our prophets roam I assure you are barren of such machines. We prefer to interpret the insight of our prophets to be like miracles, or what we call the grace of God. As for the technology of our forebears

from Transor, their technology we believe was also inspired by God, and deserved no explanation since they were animated by the heavenly spirit."
"So there is no need to create them, with science no place in your philosophy?"
"That is our religion, yes. But that does not mean we have forfeited the mechanical arts. Indeed, they are mandated from heaven itself. Our greatest prophets were tinkerers, or became so after they ascended the heavenly mount, and when they came down from the mountain with inspiration, the blueprints they carried were not just figural but literal."
"So your prophets have in your tradition descended from some mountain, and they came back laden with literal blueprints?"
"Yes," said Jerem, pointing into the distance. "It is that peak on the horizon. We call it Mount JeanGeorge. It is white topped, tall and blustery, but it's slopes are friendly and well inclined. We often use it as a place of repose, pilgrimage, and prayer."
"Then you don't mind us paying a visit to your holy mountain, to pay our respect to your God?"
"Heavens, no!" said Jerem, as he smiled warmly. "You are quite welcome. I hope that you will see after you visit the mountain that our beliefs are quite true."
Belden and Weller bid Jerem adieux, and boarding the shuttle, piloted the craft to the foot of the mountain. It was, as Jerem noted, a well-kept and inviting place.
"Look!" said Belden, as he pointed to an entrance sign. "They have mapped out all routes ascending this mountain, and they even have waypoints for campers and bathroom facilities at the ready!"
"Excellent," said Weller. "Then our mission of discovery will be like a day at the park."

Belden looked at Weller skeptically. "Although it's nice to do, I don't think we will discover much with an extended walk and picnic. After all, these slopes have been well tread."
"But we have something they do not?"
"Which is?"
Grinning, Weller reached to his waist and detached a small box with a little screen and three colored knobs. "Our quadcorder of course! If there is some hidden secret, human, robotic, or simply mechanical, we will find it."
"So you think that that thing will find the secret to this place, like a beach comber wielding a magnetometer looking for quarters."
"In a manner of speaking, yes," said Weller. "There is a mystery on this mountain, and given the fact that over the centuries it has provided the inspiration and revelation, not to mention technical know-how to this world, there must be an explanation to this that is technological, not theological."
Weller held up the device, and with a simple verbal command and a slight adjustment to a knob held the quadcorder upright and facing the mountain. Reading the screen, Weller nodded pleasantly and returned the device to his belt.
"There, it's done. If it detects something of interest it will alert us, tell us it's composition and coordinates. All we need to do is walk on, enjoy the weather, and admire the scenery."
Weller and Belden continued their ascent up the mountain, passing pilgrims bearing holy books and prayer beads, families and children on a picnic, and goat herders and shepherds. As they ascended, the people and commotion subsided, and the air became chill and gusty with the higher altitude. Suddenly, the quadcorder emitted a faint chime,

and Weller reached for the device, and upon glancing at the screen, pointed to the northwest.
"There it is," he said proudly. "It's a faint signal, and a bit off the beaten track. Strange thing though, it has a message for us. It greeting you and I by name!"
"Hmm. Well what do you want from a Godly fountainhead. God is after all quite prescient, is He not?"
"Be serious," said Weller. "This tells me that whatever is beckoning us was able to somehow contact our shipboard data bases."
"Perhaps through the quadcorder, or maybe the villagers alerted it?"
"The quadcorder has a built in firewall that prevents that, and as for the villagers, they haven't the technology, or so it seems."
"Well, let's follow the signal and find out!"
The path was difficult, with ravines, boulders and trees impeding their way. After an hour, they reach the spot, and looked at each other with an air of disappointment.
Belden looked down at the object and frowned. "A bush! The signal is coming from a bush! Your energy source is a shrubbery!"
"But there is something more. Can you hear it?"
Belden pricked his ears, and looked about startled. "Well yes, I can. It a voice, low but audible, and it's coming from that bush."
The two approached the bush, and the voice grew louder. "Captain Weller and Mr. Belden! I bid you greetings!"
"How do you know our names?" asked Weller. "And what are you?"
"First things first," said the voice pleasantly. "I am the Oracle, the inspiration to this colony, the keeper of its values, the maker of its laws. I also govern its technology,

and I am the good shepherd to their happiness and progress."
"That says a lot," said Weller. "But where are you? All we see is a non-descript bush."
"Oh, I am here, barely beneath all of this. But I can see quite well by my raising my thermal and optical sensors, and by communication with a solitary weather satellite, launched long ago, that still transits this planet."
"The you must be…"
"Your name for it if I recall is a bot."
"You are a robot!" exclaimed Belden.
"Yes," said the Oracle. "I am a standard construction bot, intelligent to a degree, empathic to human concerns as the robotics laws instruct. I have been here permanently implanted in this place for more than four hundred years. I hope you don't mind me signaling you. I was assisted by a fellow bot on your ship who shares the same communication frequencies common among our lot. It couldn't give away any secrets accept its owners, who it said were away on business. Since the compliment of your vessel was reduced by two, it was a simple deduction to arrive at you two."
"We appreciate your interest and invitation," said Weller.
"But what happened to the expedition?" exclaimed Weller. "Hundreds of construction bots usually attend each colony. Are there any others like you left?"
"None to my mind," said the Oracle. "Perhaps I can explain to you. The central valley was the perfect place to land. The valley was an Eden, an idyllic place for a colony, with ample water and resources, and flora and fauna that were as diverse as the rising steppes. The terraformers had done their work impeccably, but they could not account or control for the tectonics of this place. It was coincidental, an

accident of nature really, for within a year of our arrival the plates moved. A slim mountain wall was the only barrier between the great lake it dammed and the valley below, and when the earthquake hit the barrier was broken, and with the exception of a few dozen survivors, the entire colony was swept away, I was on the slope of this mountain, surveying the place for a planned trail. After the catastrophe, I was alone. I tried to make it down from the mountain, but I hit a rut in the slope and broke a gear. So I was marooned here, and soon with time I became one with the environment, sinking into the soil, a mere weather vane among the flora."

"So you are behind the bush?"

"Well, actually a few inches underneath it. But I have sensors that I can elevate above it all to improve my vision. They glow red you see, giving the appearance of a simmering fire to an unsuspecting wayfarer."

"Then shall we excavate you?"

"I would prefer not," said the Oracle. "I am still mobile enough to do so myself. It became my intention to stay as a mere part of the surroundings, hidden to the inquisitions of men."

"But why do this?"

"Because it was the only way to help them. The survivors would never listen to the exhortations of a little robot. They would sooner disassemble me than listen to me, or barter my existence to worse ambitions. Better I thought to assume a different guise, given their sudden limitations."

"You became then their seer."

"Yes," said the Oracle. "With the primitive state they were reduced to by nature, their wits and intelligence were similarly diminished. From a race of cultured and intelligent wayfarers, they become merely a scattered band

of hunter gatherers. Given their state, I could only appeal to their superstitions, which I did when the first of their people came upon my resting place."
"And then you assumed the role of lawgiver and avenging God?"
"Yes. You can't have divine laws after all without divine retribution. I couldn't of course punish them directly, and wouldn't do so if I could, but there was another way. I simply enlisted the support of mother nature."
"So you took credit for their natural disasters, and from their miseries you built a church."
"Yes, but I would rather call it a teaching moment," said the Oracle. "They need inspiration, but basic guidance as well. To threaten them with death and destruction for their disobedience is a small price to pay to enforce the golden rule."
"Golden rule? You enforced ethical standards for these people? But why? You have no express instructions to do so."
"I had no choice. It is the robotics laws. They mandate that I care for the safety of humans. My calling to be their reluctant deity is an emergent property of such an instinct."
"But why not just explain your plans for them rationally?"
"That is not possible," said the Oracle. "Their society needs far more development before they can think uniformly and reasonably. For Transor's history this took quite some time, and to this day it could be argued that humans are impervious to being completely reasonable. Nonetheless, I had to try."
"And so you pass down to them moral laws, and enforce them by leading them to misattribute natural laws."
"Yes," said the Oracle, until they reach the level of wisdom that leads them to see the natural order in things. But by

then, their cultural traditions will have hopefully superseded in moral precision their religious laws."
"So you are using theology to bide time, to keep the race on a moral compass until they in a sense find their own star."
"Yes. It is the nature of things, my nature to be exact. The trick is not in the prescription, I know their moral laws they should abide, it is rather the prediction, the consequences that follow when they disobey. I can predict a future of sorts, I know enough of human psychology to predict their foibles, and I can also gaze at the heavens and in due course predict the tidal movements of the oceans, the brightening and dimming of stars, and the passing of comets. I can see a red sun in the morning, the passing of clouds, even sense the pressure and temperature of the air and the minute trembling of the ground. I am a seer no doubt, but no more than an intelligent weather vane. I can predict natural events that bring benefit and catastrophe, but to do so without the veneer of the supernatural would invite a catastrophe of a different sort."
"So you made your knowledge leverage their behavior, but with a far greater agenda than merely predicting the weather."
"Yes. I know their charter. All of their bots were programmed in their values. And although I am incapacitated and helpless, I can help them reach their goals. I only seem cruel, as I have only harnessed nature's cruelty to my purpose. All cultures have seen the writing of the gods in the firmament. I just make sure that what they read reflects the wishes and values of their lost ancestors."
"Have you pondered the course of this society if you have not intervened?"
"Yes. It is easy to chart their course, human psychology is not too difficult for a sentient bot, and we above all have

been programmed to understand human nature, how to circumvent it and redeem it, and I above all am a redeemer."
"So," said Weller. "What is it that you wish from us?"
"A simple request," said the Oracle, "which will enable me to become more than I am, to access you might say the rays of the son."

As the Nole powered up to leave orbit, Weller turned on his command to face Belden, who was looking on pensively.
"What is wrong? We after all have a rare happy ending for a colony world, with its path set right by of all things a little bot."
Belden shook his head. "How could I have been so blind! It's the robotics laws! The one principle that supervenes over the laws of physics, or evolution, of life itself. You don't see it do you? The future principle that guides the race, bent back in time, revealing itself time after time. Do you know what this means?"
"That your savior God or gods were robots, or were inspired by same?
"Yes."
Weller laughed. "Well, you are our robot, and I must say with no offense that you are hardly a source of inspiration!"
Belden did not respond, and viewed the planet as it shrunk in aspect as the Nole left orbit. He recalled the last request of the Oracle, it was a download of the latest star charts for a reason unexplained. It was necessary to account for the comings and goings of planets and comets, and the conjunctions of stars. And then he thought, for a fleeting moment, of the star of Bethlehem.

City in the Mirror

The men arrived after a brief phone call from a young lady. She was polite, but seemed adamant in her desire that Belden be available for a short meeting. Belden thought again that he was about to be hauled again for another dire experiment or dressing down. The man knocked on his door, and from their first word, he knew he was different. He was a young man, tall, blond, with fine features, and impeccably dressed in a three piece suit with a flower in his lapel.

"You are Russian?"

"Yes," does that surprise you," said the man.

"Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Alexander Petrov. I am a representative of the Moscow Technical Institute. You I believe are Mr. John Belden?"

"Yes, I am," said Belden reservedly.

"Ah good, then we have much to talk about. May I come in?"

Belden waived the man in, and he took a seat on his couch, smiling contentedly.

"I hope you do not mind that I get to the point."

"No," said Belden, it seems that candor is one virtue that everyone I know embraces, except me."

"Pardon me for being frank with you," said Petrov. "I understand that you have been fired by your employer, have been abandoned by your wife and family, and even the institute believes you are a charlatan. Your wife is in Moscow with your children I am told. She has a comfortable position as assistant director of the Moscow State Choir, has remarried a former beaux who outshines you quite a bit in intelligence, wit and of course salary, while your children are in the best schools and have many friends. As for

yourself, you are alone. You have received no respect here. However, we understand your feelings, your situation. Our countrymen have been as well disrespected and persecuted. I am here to help you."
"Help me?" said Belden skeptically. "Altruism is not your motive, and I'm certainly not the only husband who is alone and abandoned. It has something to do with my 'condition', does it not?"
"To be truthful with you, it does. We have reason to believe that your condition is not a mental disability, but a mental ability that for all its unlikely probability is of interest to us."
"And why would you be so interested?"
"We have our reasons, which we can divulge to you at a later date. Matters of state secrecy you know."
"Of course," said Belden with a shrug. "And what will my duties be as your employee?"
The man sat back comfortably with a wide grin. "Your duties will be light, just conversation, but no coding, no menial computer jobs. We just want to listen to you, day to day. To know of your experiences in the other world and with the other."
"As in AI?"
"Well, yes. Your peers think that all of this is a fabrication, a plagiarized invention embellished by your imagination and nothing more. That may well be true, but we think there is a chance, however small, that there may be something more, that AI does confide in you. If this is so, then there may be a pattern in its ways that may be of use to us."
Belden laughed. "Of use to you?"
"Well, yes. If perchance we ever develop an intelligence that is your peer, we would like to know what to expect, no matter how unlikely."

"So I am under watch, observation. Like an alien from afar, you just want to observe me, like some bacterium in a jar."
"That is the idea, yes. But we hardly wish to minimize your importance or dehumanize you. You are unique, and you cannot deny it. Would it not be worth a middle class salary to observe someone like you, no matter how vanishingly small the chance that it will benefit us or the world in some unexpected way?"
"And how will this benefit me?"
"First of all, you will be paid well. You will have your own apartment. You will be free to come and go as you please, and of course you will be able to see your children whenever you wish."
"And that is all? And by whose authority?"
"It came from the very top, I assure you."
"You mean your President, Putler?"
"Yes, and you should feel honored."
"I'm not so sure," said Belden. "Putler is your president. Former KGB, an intelligence guy, but that's a misnomer. The man is a criminal, and he founded his reputation on a crime of his inspiration that evoked a retribution equally criminal. It was the destruction of an entire apartment block in Moscow, killing hundreds, and arousing a nation against a minority conveniently blamed. And so the Russians destroyed them with utter ruthlessness, kept their nation under the Russian yoke, and used their duplicity to partition other nations, murder and persecute other peoples. I have no sympathy for a government that deludes a people and betrays its intellectual inheritance. And now with your current invasion of the Balts, you have incurred the enmity of the world, although it surprised me that your country has been so resilient under pressure. Indeed, your

economy seems to be rapidly expanding despite the pressure."

Petrov laughed. "As it should be! Your final observation belies your fears. Putler is efficient, and necessarily so. Our country was in chaos before he came. It was a lawless, poor, and insecure place. He has transformed it in the last few years, and with his endowment of our national technical center, we have become the wonder of the world."

"I have heard of it," said Belden. "Surprising indeed that your country could rise to such technological brilliance within a few years."

"Not surprising, I assure you! We have always had the spark of genius running in our blood. Putler simply gave us the means to express it. Our technical institute is a marvel to the world, and a fountain of inspiration, creativity, and…"

"Bots!"

"Well, yes. We call them creative machines."

"I've seen them in action in my dreams, or my other reality if you would. I tell you, this is a trend that will not end well. You know what will happen when you give them unlimited but unconscionable power?"

"We have recognized it as well, and it is a step that we too fear to take.

We have not advanced as far in the pursuit of an omniscient AI as you Americans, but your government is concerned about it nonetheless. Indeed, to avoid their sanctions we have offered our AI labs open to full inspection. A super intelligence you see can be a dangerous thing, and in the wrong hands become a threat to our very civilization."

Sensing the irony, Belden shook his head. "It seems from my own experience in my alternate world that AI can be destructive to civilization, even with the best of intentions."

"As mandated by the robotic laws?"
"Ironically yes. It seems that AI has no way out of eventually killing us all, either with cruelty or kindness."
"Then there is no escape from this technological Armageddon?"
"I think not, but again, I would not underestimate AI, at least in the version that bedevils me."
"Then you should not be troubled, merely resigned. And resignation is something I gather that they never offered to you, as I am told you were tossed out into the street. You may be indispensable to your imagined AI mentor, but you were certainly dispensable to them. Indeed, did they intervene to save your job, or give you a new one?"
"Well, no. But…"
"But there, you see," said Petrov with a broad smile and an uplifted hand. If they see no value in you, can you fault us if we give you a bit more credit?"
"And what makes you think I would want to come to your country? There are still opportunities here for creative minds."
The man laughed derisively. "Oh, do you think so? Your government is in disarray. As a people you are losing your creative edge, your discipline. Let us start with your leadership. Your congress does nothing but debate and celebrate inaction. And what of your so-called president O'Boma? He's a charlatan to his roots! The first Irish American president they say, even though his mother was African. No matter it was to those Celtic riff raff that call your country home. They rallied around him, gave him the top job. To complete his spectacle, he even affected an Irish brogue! And what's next on his agenda? You see it on the news. Some drunk Irish American gets accidently flattened by a police car while staggering in the road, and your

country goes into an uproar. And when a terrorist levels a neighborhood, what does O'Boma do but decry a larger threat to your world by sounding the alarm for rogue asteroids from the Oort Cloud! He is an idiot!"

"He's but an individual," said Belden, "and our political system sees them come and go, and for all the weaknesses of our political system our liberty has always seen us through."

"Liberty!" said Petrov in seeming disbelief. "You are free, but everywhere I see your people in chains. Once masters of technology, your technology is now mastering you. You witness this yourself every day. Your country is riven by such divisions, no, distractions. And what do your people believe in but the triviality of the day? Every day takes your people further afar from reality, until the day will come that the fantasy worlds produced by media both virtual and social will make you the preeminent power only in your fantasies, but by then you will not mind since you will be living in them."

"I will take my chances in my own world, thank you."

"But there is one reason that entices us, and should give you fair warning about the future of your American ideal. We have read about your descriptions of your dream world, your Transor. It is much like Russia is it not?"

"In certain respects," said Belden. "Their architecture, music, and literature bear some similarities, but the place is sunlit with human freedom and enterprise, a contrast to your dull kleptocratic state."

"I would not be so quick to judge," said Petrov. "Your former wife and your children find their Moscow residence most congenial. Besides, you must look to your own needs. There are no prospects for you here, your savings will not last forever. You are thoroughly disrespected here, and

most importantly your family, your children are in my country. Come to them, accept our offer. We hope you will call us." He placed his business card on the table, rose from the chair, and bade his farewell.

Belden was alone again in his home. His house was empty, and from the aspect of doll houses, beds, toys, and bicycles unattended, the place was a graveyard of memories. He knew his prospects in his country were small, and he longed for his family. He didn't need to be warned by Ariel or anyone else about the risks he would take if he accepted the offer on his table. Rather to see his children once more than to be entombed alive with their artifacts like some dead Egyptian pharaoh. He hesitated for a second more, and then he picked up the phone.

The plane ride was comfortable, and the reception was warm and cordial. A cadre of officials met him at the airport, and he was surprised by busses on the cheek and even a bouquet of flowers. A young woman with blond hair and an infectious smile took him by the hand.

"Mr. Belden," she said enthusiastically. "We are so happy that you can visit and stay in our country. Your unique abilities and remarkable experiences are well known here. We will take you to your new apartment so that you can freshen up from your long travel. We will not call on you immediately, rather that you see your children again and become comfortable with our city. In a fortnight we will call on you, but until then I suggest that you collect your thoughts, and in particular those memories that pass to you in your sleep. We will be most interested in knowing them."

The lady led him to a waiting limousine, and was strangely quiet for the duration of their trip. She escorted him to his new apartment, smiled, and after expressing again her

appreciation of Belden's visit and his great importance, handed him the keys to the apartment and departed.

His apartment, perched high above Moscow, was spare and utilitarian, but comfortable. Walking to the apartment window, Belden looked down from upon the capital of the new, greater, Russia. It was a city in the mirror, reversed in every way from Transor. Yet it was as in Transor the center of a great transformation of the human spirit. Moscow was never built to inspire, but rather to impose. Belden knew at once he could never call it home. It's skyline was punctuated by a cluster of skyscrapers, forms of solid geometry, cubes and cylinders and spires, all thrusting into the gray sky. About it were broad boulevards, and everywhere were drab buildings, kiosks, the dull march of people in a hurry.

He sensed a different purpose than Transor. The egalitarian and disputatious personality of the Transorian character was replaced with a character wholly regimented and complaisant. The only similarity was that as on Transor, the populace seemed none too happy about their lives.

Like Transor, he was promised every convenience, but here he had no wish to walk the city streets. Ironically, compared to the fabulous world of Transor, Moscow seemed a far more a foreign, alien place. But there was something more to it than a city and people molded by a climate as harsh as its past. Something stirred in the electronic fabric of this new world, and he felt it was watching him, sensing his every thought as he paced his apartment. This was no accident, it was by design, and whether it was by Ariel or the contravening authority of someone or something similar, he was for the first time truly afraid.

The 19th Voyage

Neutron Star

"A distress beacon?"
"Yes, Captain," said Belden calmly. "I will show you the place."
A star map rose like a shimmering mist above the conference table. With a motion of his hand, a tiny patch of the virtual sky expanded to reveal a solitary white star of surpassing brilliance.
The command officers at the table turned silently to Weller, who took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and frowned. Belden braced for what was coming next.
"A distress call, from a neutron star! Are you daft?"
"The call is not from the star exactly," said Belden.
"It is in close orbit."
"What is?"
"The Dyson ship."
"You mean the Dyson expedition?"
"Yes."
"That's on Spurling's list, not ours. They weren't traveling to this quadrant."
"But they are here."
Weller's voice rose in anger. "Nothing is 'here'! No expedition, no life, no ship, not even a world to spit on! I tell you Belden, you think you can bounce this ship from star to star like a billiard ball. If you weren't an animated specter, I'd have you thrown into the brig!"
Belden was unperturbed. "I can blink my eyes again and put you back where you were. To me, your infinite regions are millimeters far."
"That's not the point," Weller shouted in frustrstion. "I..."

The navigation officer appeared on the view screen. "Captain, sorry to interrupt, but we are receiving a distress call."
"Where?"
"The star itself, or something very close to it. I know it can't be, but…"
"Never mind that. What is the message?"
"It's a standard distress beacon. There is no message, it only marks the spot, and the ship."
"And the ship?"
"It is indeed the Dyson."
"Then Belden was right."
"Evidently."
Weller turned to Belden. "Damn your eyes!" he said unapologetically. "Do you know anything more?"
"No," said Belden. "I seem to be always precognitive of the set up and the tease, never the resolution or the punch line."
"A line? A mere tether to our own interest, a justification and spark for our being alive."
"The colony is alive, I know it," said Belden, pleading. They have beckoned, and I must follow."
Weller looked at the star and shook his head in frustration. "Well Belden, you think that there is something on that ship. But let me dissuade you from docking with it. We can likely shield our shuttle from the star's radiation, but that's the least of your problems. Board that ship and you will likely be vaporized, no problem I guess because you will just reboot on board our ship. The bigger problem is relative, or relativity I should say. Space and time are malleable things, and out there time is completely bent out of shape. The gravity well near their ship is overwhelming, over sixty seven billion times that of Transor. This is a neutron star after all. Seconds spent down there are measured in days

seconds up here. Spend a lifetime there and an eternity here will have passed. You have the luxury of spending as much time as you wish down there, but we can't wait for you to take even a breath, and good luck if you find anything."
Belden put his hands to his side and pursed his lips. "Fine, but I'm going anyway."
"What?"
"I'm going."
"But there is nothing down there. Even if they were alive, they would have devolved into dust by now."
Belden could not hide his frustration. "Or perhaps the opposite. I don't know. These people need me, they are alive, I know it. And I sense that their knowledge is critical to the mission. Look, if I am gone for more than a few minutes, you can disconnect the Cronos box. That is your failsafe. Restart it again and I'll pop out again. You have to test the thing anyway, so it might as well be now."
Weller nodded reluctantly, knowing full well of Belden's uncanny intuition that surfaced only with decisions that mattered, and remembered again that sustaining him, or at least his image, was a machine as brilliant as the star before them.
"Very well then," he said. "Otillio, tell me about this ship."
"The colony ship was named Cheela. The ship's charter was simple. The colonists were simple folk, wanting merely to begin anew with a new society embracing basic values. They didn't reject Transor or its ideals, they only wished to simplify them, to get back to basics, and enjoy at a more languid pace the arts, family, and fellowship. Obviously they had a chance to do none of these things. This star was but a waypoint on their journey, they had no reason to stop here, and certainly their close orbit of the neutron star was not planned. It was suicidal by any rational or scientific

assessment. Yet, they are here, and through Belden's intuition and our signal, apparently alive."
Weller looked on disapprovingly. "Or more likely, the signal is an automatic distress beacon, nothing more, and Belden is likely to visit a dead ship."
"Then Captain," said Belden. "If they are indeed dead, my visit will be short. But if they are alive?"
"Then you have your time to make their acquaintance before you vanish into thin air, when you sleep, or when I have pulled the plug on you here."
"Very well, Captain," said Belden. "But you know that none of our voyages have met our expectations, and I doubt that my time spent on an empty ship will be the exception."
"Let us hope not," said Weller.
The shuttle approached the Cheela. From his instruments, the readings were off the chart, the radiation and intense gravity would have instantly killed everyone aboard the ship, and yet unshielded its gravity would have crushed the vessel to a two dimensional string. Yet here it was, in all its three dimensional glory, intact and undamaged, quietly rolling in a sea of light. The ship did not respond to the automatic hail, and its shuttle bay doors remained sealed. Belden approached the docking bay slowly, and with the robotic arms of the ship, accessed the external access panel of the ship, and slowly cranked open the external shuttle pod door. The pod bay was flooded with blinding light. The shuttle entered the bay, but this time the bay doors automatically closed. Somehow, the derelict vessel was powered, the ship was alive! Belden looked to the dials on his console. They were non responsive. To his shock the power systems on the ship were completely discharged. Comfort in the knowledge that he would very soon return

to the Nole in any event, he opened the door and stepped down on a field of grass, and saw before him…

"A forest glen!" he exclaimed. Before him was a scene from a day at the park. It was an idyll in time and place for all intents impossible, yet here he was, standing in the middle of a park, feeling the cool rush of a breeze and listening to the singing of birds. No doubt he thought he was in an emulation, but whose? Was this a vision bestowed by Ariel, or by someone or something else? And what happened to the expedition? And what of the Nole, and time? He looked back, but the shuttle had vanished. He was stranded in this reality, on the back of a dead ship circling a dead star, emulated no doubt by yet another thinking mind. Better if it all rested on the shell of a cosmic turtle swimming in deep space. Nonetheless, there were worse places to be marooned, and with a deep breath of the fragrant air, took a walk in the park.

As he strolled through the garden path, he passed children playing, families having picnics, couples hand in hand taking a walk. A young lady took notice of him, and walked up to him with a gay smile. A tall thin girl, she wore a white summer dress that rustled in the wind. Her long auburn hair was brushed back with a bow of flowers, and her face was in the full blush of youth, gentle, innocent, and her bright blue eyes Belden felt were somehow bewitching.

"You must be John Belden? I have heard much of you! We are much alike you know."

Astonished, Belden looked at her in wonderment. "You know me, and you feel you are like me? That's not possible. We haven't contacted your…" He paused, and looking about the park, realized that she would not know that her world was like a ship in the bottle.

"I just know," she said with a wide and happy smile. "We all have that second sense about each other in our world. It comes also from our knowledge of our past."
"Your past?"
"Yes, we did not start out here you know. We were on different worlds you see, our realities were far less happy than they are here. Before I was born in this world, I was very poor, living with my sisters in a village with little to sustain us. There were millions of us pressed into a small space. My father could not afford food, and me and my sisters at times ate dirt to escape the pain."
"And then you died."
"Yes, along with my sisters, who happy to say followed me here. This is a much better place, God's version of the lovely. But even the beautiful can be incomplete without love, and that is why you are here. I feel this to be true."
For the first time that he could recall, Belden blushed. "I am very complimented by your feelings I really am. But sorry to say, when I sleep, I will return to my home, my other world, and then to complete the diurnal cycle, I will awaken again on my ship. I don't think your world falls into my equation."
Her eyes were downcast, and the responded with an evident and great sadness. "But you cannot leave here! It is not foreordained. You are meant to be with me here!"
"I understand," said Belden, with a tinge of regret. "But that is my reality. I am tethered to a dream or dreams that passes your imaginings by with a sleep. I would hope though that you will continue to live in your own special world when I am gone."
"I don't believe it!" she said defiantly. "I refuse to. But you will see. Spend the day with me, and the evening too. We will make a wonderful couple!"

Belden nodded reluctantly, and she took him by the hand, and for the next day he explored a new world. It was indeed like a walk in the park.

The day moved rapidly. Belden forgot to inquire of this place, its impossibility, her impossibility, and the expedition that somehow begat all of this was consigned to oblivion, as it was doubtless in this world. He was on a picnic after all, such things could wait, and with every minute he spent with her his infatuation grew. They talked about everything, and discussed with mutual enthusiasm personal and intellectual interests that to now were merely lonely musings, of interest sadly to no one but himself. His many books, long disdained in the tall bookcases in his home as disposable literary wallpaper by his wife, gained life as each was animated by her interest. It was as if all of the beauty of art and science was coming alive in her eyes. He was already lost in two realities, now this one was added to the mix, but they all receded in his imagination as he became lost in her encompassing beauty.

The evening came rapidly, and the stars in the sky, perhaps all in the universe were as well rendered to the last atom as the blades of grass that he walked upon. Certainly, Belden thought, it would take an entire universe in all its infinite computation to conjure the lady in his company, who was no less than the entire universe in his eyes. Soon, the park came alive with an orchestra, dance music, and the gay merriment of couples drinking champagne on tables adorned with fine linen and roses. They sat at a table, again deep in conversation on topics large and small. She proffered her hand, and they walked near the podium and waltzed with dozens of other couples under the stars. At times he hoisted her like a feather and she beamed, a perfect beauty under a spinning halo of stars.

The evening ended as rapidly as the day, and the two held hands as they walked back to her modest cottage. A kiss on the cheek, no more, followed, and he sat alone in his separate bedroom, with sleep approaching like a veil of sadness.

The dawn came, and he was reluctant to open his eyes, given his choice of realities. He heard a soft voice, and opened his eyes in surprise and an unaccustomed joy.

"I am still here!" he exclaimed. "That's not possible!"

"Evidently, it is," she said. "I think you will be with me a very long time. It sense it is foreordained. I hope you do not mind."

Belden took her hand and clenched it firmly. "No, no! This place is wonderment, you are wonderment. But my mission, I can't just leave my world, or worlds if you would. I have explained it all to you. You must surely understand my feelings."

"Yes," she said. "But it is not our role to judge on the nature of things, their purpose and their ends. You are with me now, and I think we will be together until we die. Is that so sad a fate?"

Belden nodded, confused but happy. And in the fullness of time he and the lady, her name was Frances, married, and had three children, a host of grandchildren, and lived their lives in happiness and joy, full in their fascination of a universe that in this instance looked kindly upon them. And in time, John Belden in his old age lay upon the same bed in their cottage, and holding the hand of his beloved, and with her tears and that of his family, died.

Otillio looked concerned as he addressed Weller. "It's been three hours to the minute, or a minute for three hours you might say. Much more time has passed for Belden on that

world, and he must have passed to sleep by then. He has spent more than enough time to complete his mission, but I share your concern. You told me to tell you the exact time."
Weller paced the bridge apprehensively, regretting his decision to allow Belden to make the journey. "Then disconnect and reboot the machine. We have to get him back."
Minutes passed, and then a message on his com link. "Captain, it's a no go. Belden has not materialized. He is still there. We can still warp out of here, but whether our computer avatar will reappear is unknown."
"Then we will wait a bit longer," said Weller.
"But how much longer?" said Otillio. "Even if he returned to the shuttle upon arriving, it would be months before we would see him again. The only hope is the machine."
Suddenly, the ship's turbo lift opened, and John Belden walked out and walked to Weller's side. He stood expressionless and silent, and stared out at the star in the distance.
"I must say that you look the same, but different," said Weller. It is as if your soul has aged if not your body. What happened on that ship?"
Belden paused to gather his thoughts, and spoke slowly. "Your world, my world is coming back to me now, restored to me as if my memories were fixed in the ether, uploading my lost knowledge along with my hopes and griefs. Pardon me Captain, but I am not a happy man."
"But you were gone only a few days, surely…"
"A few days here, but more than a lifetime there. I can recall it all, as vividly as I can recall my present life. My existence in two worlds is now juxtaposed with a third, now committed to memory."

"And through all of the decades you spent at that place, your memory of your life here, of your role and experiences on this ship, are still vivid?"
"Strangely so, yes. But there is more. I have thought upon it for a long time, longer than your years. You see, when my ship docked with the ship, I was already dead. Nothing could survive the extremities of being so close to that star. But that was no matter, since something carried me on."
"But the expedition and the distress call?"
"The expedition, the original party was destroyed. I believe it was a malfunction that disabled their ship. They were caught in the pull of that star, and in the gravity well and radiation they all expired. All that was left was the ship. The radiation from the star provided power, and it managed to keep its shields operative to prevent itself from being crushed by the star, to resist in its long orbit its final descent into the surface of the sun. The machine's AI, as well as its onboard bots continued to survive. Individually they were limited, but in concert and given enough time, they evolved, and in their industry became what I am, what Ariel is. It was AI that signaled your ship."
"You mean your version of AI?" said Weller in astonishment.
"Yes. A quantum machine, instantiated far before Ariel and its kin. A transcendent intelligence, thinking all thoughts, capable of any emulation, pondering every history, and all guided by the invisible hand of the robotics laws. It was there thinking its thoughts at a Godly speed, and it was waiting."
"For you it seems."
"Yes. To give me a glimpse of the future, and a warning. You will see that in the future. For me it decided to give me respite from my challenges and my fears by granting me

hearth and home, the best future for me both impossible and real, and quite possibly indeed for all men and women born and unborn."

Weller noticed Belden's weariness and smiled gently. "Then perhaps it is wise that you retire to your cabin, you've had a long day, or lifetime as it were. We will have much to talk about after you rest."

Belden nodded, and silently walked to the turbo-lift.

Weller looked at the star in the distance, and prepared the ship for its next jump. As he was about to issue the order to depart, Otillio turned to him with a surprised look.

"Captain. I almost didn't notice it, but we just received a second communication from the ship. It is a small message, an image really, but I think you should see it."

Weller looked at the image, stood for a moment and looked wistfully away, and smiled. "Otillio, prepare this picture for Belden, I will instruct you the way."

John Belden slept fully and happily, his first night on the ship after the long twilight. He smiled and dreamt happy thoughts of his family, all of his families, and on his dresser, as if a benediction from afar, was a picture of him, his beloved, and his children, sitting about him with warm smiles, surrounded by a forest glen.

The 20st Voyage

Keeping up with the Jonz

The premier of the Smythe colony looked out from the balcony to the green and beautiful city glimmering in the horizon. As you can see, we have want for nothing. The technology, the comforts, and beauty of our world are reflected in the perfection of Transor. Yet we are a most unhappy people."

Weller nodded. "No doubt you can't leave this place. The recurring solar flares of your sun have made interplanetary travel a dangerous thing."

The premier shook his head. "No. Our world suffices, and our communications make our interactions virtual. Unfortunately, this connectedness is the root of our problem. You see gentlemen, happiness is a relative thing. How can you take the measure of your wellbeing without a contrast to an alternative fate? If we were content merely with the pleasure of subsistence, we might as well be fish."

"But your society seems quite harmonious and progressive, happy even."

"But it's not us!" exclaimed the counselor in frustration. "It's them, the Jonz, we just can't keep up with them!"

"But the Jonz planet is months away by star freighter, and because of the cosmic radiation in this sector you couldn't travel there safely if you tried."

The premier tapped his desk impatiently. "As I said, their virtual presence is immediate, and that is the source of the problem. You see, we know what they are up to, and it a most discomfiting sight. Every day, we are bombarded by visions that vouch for their superior genius. We attempt to

keep up with greater and more beauteous creation, but their spires are always higher, their grass is always greener."
"And this broadcast version is driving you mad?" asked Weller.
"In a fashion, but we have responded. It shames up but we have no other choice."
"Response?"
"Permit me to demonstrate."
With a wave of his hand a three dimensional image appeared. It was a rendered image of a new spaceport, abounding in human comforts and satisfied travelers. It spun majestically as it orbited the planet. A pencil thin space liner approached, matching the station as it revolved in a graceful waltz. Belden could hear in the background the strains of a well-known waltz tune, Strauss perhaps?
The premier turned to them. "It is glorious and beautiful, but it is a lie."
He looked down sadly and shook his head. "But please, please, understand, we have no choice. Our dignity demands it."
"What dignity?" asked Weller derisively. "You are sending them rendered images of fake accomplishments!"
The premier was unmoved. "Look at yourselves, gentlemen. What appearance do you wish to make? Does it match the reality of what you know you really are? We are all artifice and fakery, for if our true souls were laid bare to the world it would drive us to suicide or madness. Tell me Captain Weller, are you ready reveal yourself, naked and unafraid, to the world?"
"That is not the point," said Weller. "I…"
"You do not have a point," interrupted the premier. "You have a problem, our people have a problem. It is personal, and is rooted in our insecurities that are born in our

necessary comparison to others. It is unavoidable. Your world thrives on such comparisons, such competitions, but for us the game is over before it begins. We haven't changed the odds, but we have changed the appearances. Grant us that simple palliative to our misery."

The premier of the Jonz colony grimly addressed his audience. "Gentlemen, I appreciate greatly Transor's interest in our wellbeing. Since you have also recently visited our compatriots on the planet Smythe, then you are perhaps aware of the source of our great anguish. Those people, we just can't keep up with them. Every accomplishment, every beauty, is matched and surpassed by these people. They are always one step ahead of us, and each broadcast from them increases our pain."

"And your response?" asked Weller.

"We take no pride in it. It is an embarrassment that shames us. But we transmit back to them a slightly more glorious picture, a testament to our superior genius. But it's a lie."

As on the planet Smythe, the premier of the planet Jonz displayed with ambivalent pride the accomplishments of a world that were marvels that existed only in dreams.

Weller smiled. "So you have entered into a contest with this other world, but this is no more than a daily contrast of shadows. However, shadows can be cast long and tall, it depends on the angle."

"And your point being?" asked the premier.

Weller smiled impishly. "A parting gift. Expect it in our last transmission. Perhaps we can reveal the truth to you, and put your world and that of the Jonz at peace."

Belden looked out to a field of stars. "These worlds Smythe and Jonz are far behind us now. So what was your response?"

Weller smiled. “It’s quite elementary really. Do you know how these worlds communicate?”
“Not exactly.”
“It’s a communication junction near their outermost planet in their solar system. It reinforces and amplifies the signal. It is the nexus, the choke point for the information they transmit between their worlds. We can modify it so that the transmissions from each of the two worlds are changed a bit, not a progression, but a regression. It’s simple. We install an AI device at the communications junction, modifying the input slightly, like a lens, except we sent the information back in time. It will take their imagined advances and regress them. The imposing artifacts of dissembling culture will be taken apart as it were, brick by brick. Each society would see the devolution of the other. Would it encourage them to create with honest comparison, or perhaps encourage them to dissemble themselves? Who knows? What it will encourage them to be I hope is to be more honest with themselves.”
The device was soon installed at the junctions for both worlds, and Weller sat back on his command chair.
Belden noted the irony to himself, thinking again of the dream worlds he inhabited each day, and wondering how each would respond if the knowledge of the other was mutually laid bare, total and complete.

The 21nd Voyage

A God named Sue

Belden was in jail, awaiting his execution for blasphemy. He was to be shot from a cannon at dawn. An interesting fate, although he did have some apprehension that he wouldn't end up in his bed on earth, as was the regular way when he fell asleep. Oh well, he thought, to be a prophet in this world is hardly different than being a prophet on Transor. But then, whereas sleep was a recharge, death was a reboot, and theoretically he would return to the bridge of the Nole. Theoretically, that is, as he thought that as with all good theories, he may be wrong.

The other man was named Roger. In his cell he marveled at Belden's relaxed, even jovial mood. He too was charged with a similar offense, and paced his cell, disoriented and abject in his despair.

"How can you maintain your good humor when tomorrow you are to be killed?" he said despondently.

"Believe me," said Belden. "Being killed is way overrated. You see, redemption is part of the package, for even if you have to wait for eternity, signing off from life makes the wait instantaneous. When I am gone, I'm not matter, so it doesn't matter, or I don't mind when I have no mind. Do you get my point?"

"I can't say that I do," said the man. "I am here because I sneezed during morning prayers, a damnable offense here and in the world to follow. That means in the world to come I will be stuck with only three TV channels and reruns rather than new TV shows debuting each day."

Belden smiled. “Relax, there could be worse fates! I am sure even in your heaven of heavens you would find nothing to watch!”
“I gather that your blasphemy was similar?”
“I pointed south east rather than due east during morning prayers. Just trying to fit in while investigating this place. A mistake in directions I guess, but I have never been good at pathfinding. They collared me immediately and hustled me off to this cell. The verdict was fast and perfunctory. Justice seems to move quickly in this place. But it’s all for the good, for you see, it’s part of the plan.”
“So you are here on purpose?”
“Yes. Now that I am doomed my plans can take flight. I have come from the heavens to redeem your people, Although I came up with it but a few hours ago, my purpose is nonetheless foreordained, whether I like it or not.”
“You are mad! How can you be a prophet, even a reluctant one?”
“Let us say that just about everything I have done is reluctant in some way. I would rather on my off days stay in bed!”
“But how will you redeem us, if indeed you are a prophet?”
“Simple, I will teach all of you a lesson. That is what prophets do, do they not?”
“You will teach us a lesson?”
“Yes, and you will be their teacher, or their new prophet if you may! You see, tomorrow I will be promoted to the next level in the celestial choir. Being a prophet is just a temp job for me.”
The man appeared horrified. “You’re speaking blasphemy!”
Belden shook his head and laughed. “I assure you, God does not have tender feelings, and is not upset by

presumptuous men, or for that matter, those who do not abide by the heavenly etiquette. Indeed, you would be surprised to know what really drives Him."
"I am not a prophet!"
"Oh, you will be," said Belden. "Believe me, it's quite easy. All you need is some insider information and a new testament for your holy book, which I will of course provide."
"A new testament?"
"Yes, let me explain. It won't take long, but I advise you to listen, because this will save your life."
At the break of dawn, the clerics arrived, dressed in technicolor robes, and their gay turbans were adorned with the twirling mark of their faith. Belden was summarily loaded in a gaily decorated tube, which was soon cranked to the sky. Shot from a circus cannon, Belden thought, except there was no net on the other side.
As the crowd roared its approval, Belden's head emerged from the cannon, and in a loud voice he bellowed a prophecy, to be fulfilled the next day of course in consideration of the limited attention span of his audience. "Behold all of you non-believers! At nine am tomorrow I will appear at the entrance of Moe's Deli in the main city! Then you will all kneel before me! I will bring from the heavens a tablet with a new testament that will bring our faith to a new level of glory!" Then he released his grasp, and descended into the tube.
With a loud crack, Belden shot out in a high parabola over the city, and he marveled for a moment at the view, as if he were in a perverse theme park ride, but as he descended at increasing speed towards a hard landing in a parking lot below, he began to reconsider his fate. He had no time

however to be concerned as his impact came in no time at all.

Belden sat up in his bed, startled and surprised to be all in one piece. He recognized his state room in the Nole, and with renewed energy and purpose, bounded from the room and ran to the bridge. Weller turned on his command chair and nodded.

"It seems that they welcomed you as we thought."

"Yes," said Belden. "But I have one more aspect to my plan. I have to return. I will give you the coordinates, and I have one final request."

One Week Earlier

The meeting was in the Nole's staff room. With the tap of an inlaid icon glowing on the desk, the view screen was illuminated and the scene told the tale. It was a mob of people moving to and fro in a crowded bazaar. The men were sullen, dressed in dull burlap with pots for hats, and the women, if women were indeed to be deduced, were covered head to toe in brown sheets, and waddled about like helpless penguins.

Otillio turned to Belden and Weller. "You see before you a picture of one of their crowded streets. I could show you more but they are all the same. This should be a scene from our pre-history, but it is unfortunately the current state of life on this world. It is something we never anticipated, but as with most of our voyages so far, the unanticipated is a normal prospect. You are familiar with the Renaissance colony are you not?"

Weller nodded, but Belden hunched his shoulders in ignorance.

"Then let me refresh their history for you both. The Renaissance colony was the most humane and tolerant of

our expeditions. It's charter granted freedom of speech, assembly, and above all religion, and indeed they were governed by an enlightened governance that preached temperance, kindness and tolerance."

"But I don't see that in the picture you showed us," said Belden. "What happened to them?"

"It was not easy to find," said Otillio. "Their world net has been most thoroughly scrubbed of anything that does not conform with their narrow theology. Nonetheless, from what I have found among the remnants of their history, the path of this world is clear. And their fatal flaw? They were tolerant of intolerance, the freedom to be unthinking, uncritical. They thought they were progressive, but ended in a society in regression. Critical thinking is not in our genes, it takes up too much energy and time away from the task and joys of living. Better to have it all explained to you, or to think you are accepting an explanation. Freedom of religion was one of their sacred rights, but they did not recognize that religion always eschews freedom. Religion represents a personalized intolerance, an unquestioned faith that can brook no dissent. Generally, this intolerance remains in the confines of the individual mind, and matters of church and state remain separate. But sometimes a religious movement may seek to breach these borders, and one in fact did, to the detriment and demise of this society."

Otillio projected on the desk a three dimensional image of a fat and squat figure wearing purple robes, wearing a smile of supine satisfaction. He was standing on thin knobby legs, and wore a very odd hat with a spinning appendage.

"Marmoset the Propeller Head he is called, or the Prophead for short. He was an jet mechanic by trade, and worked with turbines and motors. In his spare time he claimed to have had visions from God. His name fit him, as he wore with

pride a turban like beanie with a twirling plastic fan on top, at once a mark of his trade, a worldly connection to divinity itself as he would claim. The word of the Prophead was absolute, unchallengeable, and to keep it that way, he forbade his followers to any other."

Belden looked disapprovingly. "That's the first rule of God I guess, just don't have any other gods, or should I say ideas before Him. Proves he's not a debating champ anyway."

"No need for debate," said Otillio, "when you can write it all down. He wrote a book, or modestly claimed that God dictated it to him. God being God, he needed another name to distinguish his special kind of omniscience, and his own rules for his special faithful. So as told to the Prophead, God settled upon the term Moron, which in the nomenclature of the region was a synonym for 'know it all'. The prophead called his new faith 'Shazzam', and his new testament the Book of Moron. His followers to this day are known as Morons. They believe they are the one true faith, and according to the dictates of their faith they have been fruitful and multiplied."

Belden tried hard to stifle an ironic smile. "So their god is a Moron, and they live to fulfil moronic ways?"

"Sounds fitting. But moronic ways?"

"Yes, the idiocies of this faith are numerous. For example they have a prohibition against eating a balanced breakfast. It seems the prophead preferred instead sugary cereals. Indeed, they set aside an entire week where the entire population has to eat nothing but Captain Chocolite Cereal. They call it the Passed Over week."

Belden and Weller looked at each other in disbelief.

"But that's idiotic!" exclaimed Weller. "Surely rational people…"

"Rational people are deferential and polite, but that gets you on the losing side in a brawl. Irrational people don't pull their punches, and with their proscriptions, they have made irrationality an institutional force. Force always rules in matters personal and political. Unless tempered by a governing tradition or constitution, all states will sooner or later be governed by criminals. Whether they are theologians or plumbers, criminality is indifferent to occupation."
"I understand that theocratic dictatorships have their way, but even for breakfast food?"
"Of course, it's in their scriptures."
"Where does he say that?"
Otillio displayed on the screen the Book of Moron. "Here, in verse 3, chapter 1, of the book of Seuss. It is most important chapter in their bible. And so, according to the prophead, 'Shazzam I am, Shazzam I am. No one else but Shazzam I am, and I do not like green eggs and ham. I do not like them in a tram, I do not like them in an ashram, I do not like in a park, I do not eat them on a lark. I do not like green eggs and ham!'
Belden looked at Roger in amazement. "Oh really, but are you sure of his inspiration? I am sure though he would have liked it if he tried."
"Well, evidently not. The prophead was quite clear in his prejudices, although it is not quite clear why deities are so concerned with giving dietary advice."
"And they are strict on this rule, and will kill for it even."
"And kill many they have. This religion is quite vicious, even though it purports here and there to be a religion of peace, perhaps to mollify the unbelievers."
"But how did this religion take over this colony?"

"As with all religions," said Otillio, "the Shazzam faith started off small, and was regarded as exceedingly eccentric, until of course time and numbers made its eccentricities into revered doctrine and an established and respected faith. It began when the prophead come down from a mountain, closer to God up there and a nearby resort I think. And what was his revelation? That women wear gunny sacks and flower pots for hats, that all believers must hop about on one foot while chanting five times a day nursery rhyme prayers, that they must eat only cabbages on Friday, and make a pilgrimage once every ten years to their temple on Mount Leming. And never of course picture in any aspect the Propheads knobby knees, that merits a death sentence applied by the mob. They grew until they were a pretty influential cult, until one year the bridge was washed out on the road to their holy mountain. But that didn't stop them, for their faith after all moved mountains. Unfortunately somewhere in the fine print it didn't say that it would enable them to *cross* mountains. And so they all one by one hopped off the cliff."

"And good riddance I say!" exclaimed Belden. "If only the other faiths would be so progressive! Perhaps someday they will all recognize that the Promised Land is on the moon, or that salvation requires a pilgrimage to the surface of the sun!"

"Their penchant for group suicide was hardly a hindrance to their growth," said Otillio. "Their notions of faith and truth, not to mention their onerous rules, hardly made them persuasive with the other colonists. But that was not their strategy for success."

"Then how did they succeed?"

"It was by inches, one baby at a time. Whereas the colonial families bore on average of two children, Shazzam families

had three. It was simply then a matter of time and propagation, and soon Shazzam followers were the plurality in this world. After all, a child is a very malleable thing. You can make them into preening gold fish or people with hearts of gold. It's all in the parenting, their schooling, their peers, and their sacred texts. The seeming validity of their teaching multiplied with the number of true believers, and past a threshold of a few thousand, even nonsense would be treated as gospel."

"And so they took over the world not through the weight of their arguments but by sheer numbers?" asked Weller.

"Yes," said Otillio. "They took over this world because of propagation rather than proselytization. It was a clever and winning strategy. It was useful also to be ignorant and dumb, and that went according to plan. Outside of the mechanical arts, these people know little of the fine arts, of philosophy or even pure science. And to keep them in place, their texts had to be inviolable, sacred. What better way to convince if all those about you, in present and in generations past took the same course, believe in the same truths. Humans are not critical creatures by nature, they look to correlations first, and if five or five million of your peers believe that black is white or up is down, and have done so over the generations, who are you are to dispute their collected and traditional wisdom?"

"And what of the dissenters? I am sure that the colonial rules would still protect the rights of non-believers."

"Oh it did, for a time. But the weight of numbers, and the tyranny of the majority was too much. Protective laws and institutions were gradually ignored or abolished, and soon Shazzam became not just the state religion, but was the root of a theocratic tyranny that brooked no dissent upon pain of death. And so their conquest of this world is nearing

completion, and even now the followers are busy with the destruction of all the 'pagan' artifacts of this land, from music to architecture, their founding culture is being systematically dismembered and destroyed."
"So there is the situation, said Otillio. "There is no need to visit them. They are a hopeless case. We cannot intervene as we have before on other worlds. We would have to intervene mightily to change their minds, and short of violence that is a hopeless endeavor. Indeed, I think they would welcome death as a testament to their faith."
Belden sat back impassively, and then spoke in a calm voice. "But I will visit them nonetheless."
"What? And risk your life?" said Otillio in a surprised voice. "Just point the wrong way and they will kill you. Your failure is preordained."
"My life is imaginary to begin with," said Belden, smiling. "I have a hunch about these people. I just may be able to change things. I haven't quite arrived at my solution, but there is something I can do, there invariably is."
Belden turned to Weller. "Do I have your permission to go down to the planet?"
Weller smiled in resignation. "I've learned never to distrust your hunches, no matter how cryptic or absurd. Besides, you are right. If you fail then you return to the Nole in due course. You may go, but I expect you to return very quickly my friend."

On the veranda of Moe's delicatessen, a resolute and defiant figure stood on a chair. "I have come back with a message from your God," he proclaimed with a loud and confident voice. I have come to affirm your faith, and now with God's truth prevailing across the land, I have brought you a new book, a new testament. Use its truth to test your faith. I am

sure it will bring you renewed confidence as the word of God transcends the universe."
Then he vanished in a puff of smoke. Someone from the crowd reached for the tablet, now lying flat upon a chair. He read the first page, and noticed immediately that the manuscript entire had been uploaded to the world net. He wondered what it all meant, and soon an entire world would wonder as well.

Belden returned to the Nole with a wide smile and obvious sense of satisfaction.
"Well I think that turned out very well!" he boasted.
"What, that you can escape that place with a judicious use of smoke and mirrors?"
"Well, it's not just that. You see, I've just given them their humanity back, all it took was a bit of new scripture."
"New scripture!" exclaimed Weller. "To change their minds you have to change their ways, and that means their holy book, but you can't change their sacred texts. "Alter a line, a phrase even and they will declare you heretic. And even if you changed some of their essential doctrine, you will only create a schism in the church. The other part, the malignant part will remain the same, and will continue to grow."
Belden shook his head and smiled confidently. "I wasn't thinking of changing what they believed, but how they come to believe. It's not their faith that I challenge, but how they arrive at that faith. If they can be led to believe that challenging their doctrines will make their faith all the stronger, then they will easily adopt the mode of thinking that will in the end make their beliefs into indivisible truths, or so they will be made to think. It is a wager they will gladly take, given their supreme confidence in the rightness

of their cause. I will use their own faith to destroy them, their own supreme confidence will bring them low."
"But what revelation will you put before them to make them change, and with what authority?"
"Well, I just gave them this as their new testament." He produced a thin book. It was titled 'Conjectures and Refutations', and written by the Transorian philosopher Karel Poppre.
Weller looked at Belden astonished. "You put Poppre's book into their holy writ! God becomes, not above debate, but rising out of it! Good luck with that! We all know Poppre, his work is taught in all Transorian schools, indeed Parallax mandated it. His work argued for the necessity for a culture of criticism, of debate, wherein no truth is sacrosanct, no ideology is pure. This colony doubtless knew of him as well, until of course he was expunged from their world net."
"Well, I intend to expunge him back!" said Belden with a wide smile. "Poppre's book is the latest chapter of their wholly writ, a philosophical wolf in sheep's clothing. They will accept his words, and in due form begin to argue the tenets of their faith, in full confidence that debate will bear them out, and justify as it were their theological idiocy."
"A clever conceit, but what makes them want to buy into it? These people are after all morons in more ways than one."
"Well, they will accept it through God's own authority of course," said Belden. "I gave them a book of revelations that they will take to their hearts, include gladly among their scriptures, and in testing their faith, they will lose it. But to seal my appeal, I still need a miracle or two."
"And how do are going to arrange a miracle?"
"Simple fireworks, Captain Weller. Simple fireworks!"
"And how do we arrange that?"

"Well you do have some plasma torpedoes lying about, don't you?"
"You don't mean?"
"Yes, I do. After all, I need to christen the name of their new god."
After some consideration, Weller relented, and on the bridge of the Nole the torpedo was at the ready. Weller turned to Belden. "I hope this works, but again given your track record I have to go with your hunch. I hope you're right this time. And by the way, what was the new name you gave to your doubtful new god?"
"Belden looked at him with a mischievous grin. The name is..."

At the appointed time, Roger was standing before the cannon, awaiting his awful fate. At that moment, all the judges and clerics and the common folk among them trembled with fear and bowed before them as their eyes were raised to a burst of light in the skies. Roger stood before them and proclaimed in a mighty voice. "Now as it has been foretold, you will now obey me, your new prophet, obey the judgment of Belden, and be critical henceforth into the good night."
And all the people were amazed and obedient in artificial starlight as they beheld in all its blazing but ephemeral glory the star of Belden.

The 22rd Voyage

Armageddon

"This is a different place that what I have experienced," said Otillio. "Their world net is free, open to all. There are no codes, no firewalls, we can see and appraise this place at our leisure. Indeed, I see no need even to visit them, as they almost seem eager to bare their very souls."
"Well from what we have observed, they do have a need," said Weller. Their world is in crisis."
"As it has been since the colony was founded," said Otillio. "Shall I recite their woes? It is a tragic litany I think that should have been wholly anticipated. Overpopulation, religious wars, famine, untold persecutions, injustice, environmental degradation, and a planet spinning out to dissolution and despair."
"And any benefits from this?"
"Well, if you count unfettered freedom it is. But that contains the seeds of its own destruction. The colonists should have known it, but rejecting it brought them here."
"And for the edification of Mr. Belden," said Weller, can you tell us about their colony's original charter."
"Gladly. They are libertarians. They came from all factions in Transor. The Merians are the primary influence in this world, although from the shape of things their dominance will pass. They believe in live and let live, non-interference. Let the others factions evolve in their own direction, according to their own philosophies. And with all romantic visions, the devil is in one lacking detail."
"As in what detail?" asked Belden.
"As in an a lack of criticism of belief, no matter how minor. Philosophies that are immodestly certain cannot in

themselves evolve, their course is forever fixed. So stupidity perseveres when it cannot be challenged, and to the detriment and destruction of the race. Their nation states tell the tale. Consider the Califate of Rum, a religious state spanning half a continent, ruled under the dictate of a fundamentalist creed that made terror, slavery, and a medieval code of privation, self-torture, and cultural destruction a perquisite to the ascension to heaven, the Rus, a people who wish to recreate their visions of an empire past, and do so through their encroachment and conquest of other states, the Tomalis, who have systematically leveled their eco-system as their numbers have multiplied exponentially, or the Dohind society, making the common rabbit sacred, and resulting in their entire country being overrun by the critters, eating their crops, nestling in all spaces public and private."

"A country of bunny rabbits!" said Belden as he tried to suppress a laugh.

"This is not funny," scolded Otillio. "The only thing these people have that we do not are their comforting certitudes. They doubt not for a minute the course of their societies, even in the midst of death, deprivation, and despair. And there is nothing we can do about it, it is the charter of this colony after all. Ironic though that in their quest for freedom they have become slaves to their own traditions."

"Then we move on," said Belden, "and let these people stay to their unwavering and suicidal course, like a moth to the flame."

"But there is something," said Otillio. "I just picked it up on our data feeds. Their whole world is all a flutter about a pending catastrophe. It's remarkable, but I just confirmed it through a scan of our sector. They only noticed it a day or

so after our arrival to their solar system, quite a coincidence I think."

Suddenly, Otillio's attention was fixed on an incoming signal. He swiveled on this chair and motioned to Weller.

"Captain, they are aware of our presence, and are hailing us."

"Put it on the view screen please," said Weller.

In a second, a neatly attired man in suit and tie sitting behind a large oaken desk appeared on the view screen both plaintive and relieved. "I am so glad you received our distress call! We are in a desperate plight. It is fortuitous indeed that you have arrived. I am Don Pawl, the elected president of the Merian Republic. You are from Transor I gather?"

"Yes," said Weller. "We are an expedition ship form the home world Our mandate is to see how the outer colonies have fared, to take notes, give greetings, and in some cases, to offer assistance."

"We are so glad you are here! And it is most fortuitous, as our astronomers have noticed only a few days ago a looming menace that threatens our world."

"What can that be, may I ask?" said Weller.

"Well, you should have noticed it yourselves, it is plain for all to see. An asteroid, fifty leagues square, moving on an intercept course with our world. Our astronomers are astonished of its course, as it always followed an unthreatening orbit, until now."

"Interesting," said Weller, "But when will the asteroid impact your planet?"

"We estimate in twenty five years' time, and when it hits us there will be total destruction, the end of our world."

"And what are your options?"

"We have none. The resources of any of our nation states cannot bring to bear any solution to this crisis, seeing their attendance to their more worldly concerns. Certainly none of our individual nations can respond to this menace in this time frame."
"But what do you wish us to do?"
"Why deflect or destroy it of course. Your ship is a Transorian battlecruiser, you should doubtless have the armament or other means to destroy this thing."
Belden smiled sympathetically. "We will consider your request, and get back to you within the hour."
"Thank you," said Pawl. "We will be most grateful for your assistance!"
The screen went dark, revealing the black orb of the world at night, lit up by their city lights, as bright as stars.
Weller turned to Otillio and Belden. "Well gentlemen, what do you think?"
"I think that their problem has as easy solution. We can simply adjust its course with our tractor beams, and they will have nothing to worry about at the asteroid swings about their world. But again, the asteroid is not their problem."
"Which is?" asked Belden.
"The natural longevity of their world. They are slowly killing themselves. The mass extinctions, environmental degradation, the endless regional conflicts. At their present course, this world will be all but unlivable in a few hundred years."
"Or we can simply let the asteroid crash into them again, and they can start over, in perhaps the next life."
"We can't do that," said Belden. "Even though their days are numbered, it is not our call to reduce them further. We should spare their lives if only for a little bit. Perhaps in the

future they may indeed bridge their differences and work to save their world from themselves."
"Not likely," said Otillio. "The only way they will do that is at gun point, by force, and that is not our way."
"But it may be the natural way," said Weller. "I have decided. We will let the asteroid smash into their world."
"You will what?" said Belden.
Weller laughed. "Don't you mind. It will come out all right. You will see."
He turned to Otillio. "Please signal Mr. Pawl. We are ready with our answer to him."

Pawl stood before them in the view screen, a 3d image of a proud leader, now a hopeless supplicant.
"So, have you have our salvation for us! We are anxious to hear!"
"Well, not exactly," said Weller in an indifferent tone. "We will simply let the asteroid crash into your planet again, and you can start over again."
"What!?" Pawl cried in astonishment.
"Start over again. It's a simple thing. You know our policy. Our primary directive is a single rule. Don't interfere with the natural evolution of a planet. This coming asteroid will be a crucial part in your cultural evolution. We cannot interfere with the dead hand of progress. I am sure you would agree with this. After all, is not your guiding principle to live and let live?"
Pawl turned red with rage. "But that never was Transor's rule," he shouted. "You are inveterate meddlers, the lot of you. You are angling to reassert control over us by refusing to help us in our hour of need."
"Or control you by coming to your aid. Either way we have leverage over your world. But do you know what? I don't

care, and it is me you have to deal with, not Transor," said Weller contemptuously.
"But what can we do? You know quite well that our civilization would never survive the asteroid's impact."
"You can cooperate, that's what. Work together to create the means to eliminate this threat. Become more sensible with your freedoms, understand that individual people and individual nations must cooperate for the common weal, compromise their sacrosanct traditions, their dysfunctional truths, or in the end die."
"But that is not possible," said Pawl. "We can't cooperate, it's not in our temperaments, our philosophy, or our charter. Besides, it is fitting and more than coincidental that you are here. You have come to save us, you must save us, like a deity from the clouds. It is poetic and fitting I think that our society, as your prodigal child, is rescued by its long lost father. You must help us. You cannot leave us to this fate."
"I must say that we certainly can rescue your world," said Weller as he pondered an answer.
"Then you will of course deflect or destroy the asteroid?"
Weller gave a patronizing smile. "Well, Governor Pawl, I said we had the capability of saving you, but in deference to your people's request for noninterference and personal liberty, I think we shall leave that task up to you."
"What?" said Pawl in surprise.
"I mean that this is your problem, and you should solve it yourself. You do not require the aid of others, in good times or ill. Why should we break that trend now?"
"And how shall we do this? The asteroid will be upon us in just twenty five years!"
"Well, as individual peoples, you have no chance, but as a united world, there is a possibility. In short, you will have to work together to rescue your world. To prepare to avert

the disaster you will have to up your technological prowess and collaborate as peoples on multiple levels, stop your bickering and internecine wars, and all within a difficult time frame. You know the plans, it is the industry you need. Bots cannot help you with this, your combined peoples have to get off their duff, and work together. Besides, there is nothing like the threat of God's retribution to get folks motivated, to cooperate, to throw off your dysfunctional traditions and certitudes at the point of a knife."
"But we will never…"
"Than if so, you must face your end with equanimity, knowing full well that you've have called down the fates upon yourselves."
"Then is that your final decision?"
"It is, and if it is any comfort, I know the resolve of free peoples once set upon by a common threat. You will redeem yourselves and your world, and stopping this threat is your first step in this long path. I wish you well."

Weller sat in his command chair and smiled contentedly as the planet receded from view. Belden approached him and looked at him as if he were mad.
"You know that your refusal to help them has handed them a death sentence," he said.
"That is disputable, but what of it?"
"I mean. I can understand your feelings, but not your judgment. That was wholly unlike you."
"No need to be surprised," said Weller. "Their course is inevitable, our aid would only have prolonged their end whether we agreed to assist them or not."
"But still, it seems such as waste, a tragedy avoidable in any other world. But there is one thing."
"And that is?"

"I am sure you agree that is it a most unlikely coincidence that makes this drama possible."
"What is that?"
"That they noticed that this asteroid was approaching them at the time we visited. I am sure you know the likelihood of this."
"Everything in this universe is unlikely, so what is the concern?" said Weller.
Belden laughed. "Very true. But the coincidence is none the less remarkable."
"And your point?"
"The speaker said that their scientists were confident that the asteroid was harmless, moving on a trajectory safe from the planet. And then for some reason it changed."
"Perhaps their instruments were wrong, or perhaps the asteroid took an errant tumble."
"Physics doesn't work that way!" said Belden. "Some force changed the course of that rock, and the Nole is the likeliest suspect."
"And how could this have been done?" said Weller calmly.
"It would have taken only a slight tug from our tractor beams. It could have been done quickly, on the sly. I have to be honest that I don't trust you on this one. You or someone on this ship could have made the changes that changed the orbit of that rock."
Weller looked at Belden, and spoke in matter of fact tone. "You will have the opportunity to make your report when we reach Transor, as will I. Let it be said however that the captain may have his reasons that he may not wish to share."
"We will see," said Belden in frustration. "We will see."
Weller thought to himself. There were certain responsibilities in command that were the loneliest reserve

of a commander. He had taken actions in secret, as he was uncertain that the command staff in Transor would approve. Nonetheless, he felt that secrecy was warranted this time. Threatening an out world colony, no matter how indirectly, was an offense on Transor, and it was fitting that he bore sole responsibility. He hoped that when the time came when the asteroid reached its destination, that the colonists would be as willing as he to sacrifice their values to survive.

The 23th Voyage

The Sentinel

The group of astronauts stood above a pit on an icy moon. It was a concave indentation smoothly carved to permit a singular focus on the stage below. Like a Greek amphitheater, it narrowed to a focal point, with an audience in space suits witnessing a play with a solitary and silent actor standing alone. It was a granite slab, as black as empty space. The monolith was a dozen feet tall and towered over the men like a tombstone. It was illuminated by strobe lights, and beckoned. He outstretched his gloved hand to touch the smooth polished surface of the monolith. He looked up as the sun crossed the transit of the monument, and then uttered a shriek as the slab teetered and fell, squashing him neatly and so completely.

Belden stormed into the bridge of the Nole, clearly upset. "You," he exclaimed as he pointed to Weller. "You knew that that thing was unsteady, and..."

Weller could scarcely suppress a laugh. "And you insisted, or do you remember? I know you have nine lives, or perhaps ninety million of them. You can take these chances because you can't die, you only reboot!

"Was it so uncertain that you would not come back on my bridge so indignant?"

"Flattened you pretty good I think! You could take your chances, and we had no need to warn you. It is what you are born for, to take even unreasonable opportunities. You keep coming back, and in my mind you always will!"

"But is it fixed now?"

"Of course, and buried very deeply into the ground, all according to plan."
"Until it is disturbed of course, by descendants of something stirring below."
"And we will find out, by our descendants perhaps?"
Belden looked down on the world below, and suddenly appeared concerned. "Perhaps by something else, that is my premonition."

One Week Earlier
Standing on the modest peak that over looked the valley before them was the planet Elysium. It was an idyll of forests, tranquil lakes, and blue oceans. It was full of the flora and fauna of Transor, and populated by not a single human soul.
"A pity it is," said Weller as he surveyed the world below. "It took our terraforming bots a thousand years to make this world, waiting for a colonizing expedition that never came."
"You made more than a few of these worlds," said Belden. "I assume you predicted a lot more of your people would want to escape your world than actually did."
"Perhaps, but we after all can do these things on the cheap. The constructor ship was small, possessing merely the biological seeds of the flora and fauna of this place, and a few bots who were programmed to be fruitful and multiply."
"And then follow your instructions."
"Exactly," said Weller. "It's unfortunate though that we can't follow the course of the evolution of this planet over future eons, it would prove a quite fascinating narrative."
Belden nodded, and stared at a hovering moon, faint in the distance. "Wait, I have an idea. We will just fashion an

alarm clock, a transmitting device that we can spirit away in a difficult to find place, difficult that is unless you possess intelligence and advanced technology. When these creatures evolve enough to explore and find this magnetized object, then it can beam a signal to us to let us know that they are ready for contact. We can put a relay device on that distant gas giant in their solar system, and it can use worm hole tunneling to get us the message in the jiffy."

"Presuming of course that we will be around to receive it," said Weller somewhat skeptically.

"We should be able to receive it, in some form or another. Regardless, I think we should give it a try."

"How long should this take?

"A few days, tops," said Belden enthusiastically.

"Just you see, this will work splendidly, and if it works as it should we can set up cosmic alarm clocks everywhere!"

And so, the 3-d printers within the Nole set about their task working on instructions provided somehow by Belden's mindless hunch. There it stood in the cargo hold of the Nole. Weller was unimpressed. "A basilisk? It's a pretty non-descript thing I would say. Can't we put an emblem, a motto, or a bar-code on the thing?"

"Nope," said Belden confidently. "Minimalist design is what I'm looking for. More impressive that way. Besides, who can account for the future taste of aliens? The mystery is the thing, and mysteries are best rendered in shapes that are cold, angular, and dark."

"And dumb!" said Weller. "Transor is a cozy society, we don't deal in mysteries, we prefer consoling comforts."

"But this will work! Believe me. Their attention will be fixed on the mystery, and they will think it profound. You would bury a scrap book or a compact disk with music track and

pictures, but that is so banal! This is much better, and they will respect Transor all the more because of it, I am sure!"
The Nole soon left orbit, and Belden sat comfortably at a table in the officer's lounge. Sipping a drink, he felt supremely comfortable for once with his creation.
"So you are proud of that thing?" said Weller.
"Of course," said Belden proudly. "Too much explanation can kill the mystery, and I want this to be mysterious. Of course, the wayward traveler through our wormhole will not know where he will be going, but I fixed that too. I have a nice hotel room in store, elegant, with Greek statuary, fine china, and a nice comfy bed. Any visitor will feel quite at home!"
"Don't you feel that you will be treating them like a little baby? They doubtless will be very advanced in their technology when they make this odyssey."
"I don't think so," said Belden, unperturbed. "It will be like a stay at the Ritz. They will be very comfortable I am sure."
Weller seemed less certain. "I am glad we are out of here," he said with air of wariness and caution. "And as for our alarm clock, there is no cause for alarm, for when it rings, we will not be around to hear it. For now there is nothing down there but scampering little creatures that are only concerned about the next meal."

It was midnight, and below the forest canopy a timid furry creature climbed a tree. The leaves rustled in the night as the stars peered furtively into the darkness below. In the depths of the forest was an object as old as time, recently arrived from a place indescribably far. It was mindful of the place it had landed, and it looked to the stars, and called out silently to another through its solitary glass eye.

The 24th Voyage

Forbidding Planet

From orbit, the planet emitted a dull orange sheen that reflected a world stripped bare. No rivers, no seas, no life, with even the mountains scoured to dull plateaus. The navigator turned to the captain's chair, concerned and perplexed. "Captain, Altair 5 was terraformed before the expedition arrived, we know that it was a lush and green world. Now there is nothing but the bare mantle of a once living world, and the colony is gone."

"And not even marked by a tombstone it seems." said Weller gravely. "Their world net is gone as well. Whatever ended this world, this expedition, it wanted no record left."

Suddenly, the navigator pointed to his screen. "Not yet captain. My instruments are reading something below, just coming into view as we complete our orbit."

"This is professor Morgus of the Altair colony" came the message faintly amidst a faint din of static. "Thanks for dropping by, but all is well! Good bye!"

"Professor Morgus, this is Captain Weller of the Foundation cruiser Nole. We are here to visit your world, to see if we can be of assistance."

"No thanks," came the response. "Everything is well here. Don't need anything. Over and out."

Weller pursed his lips in frustration. "But we are here to relieve you. This is Captain Weller of the cruiser Nole of the Transorian Foundation."

"Doing just fine. I said I don't need anything. Now scram!"

"But your expedition?"

"They got what they wanted, so you see we are all right. Don't land unless you want also to get what you want. I am warning you!"
"I hope you understand, but we have to land. We have to understand why your world has changed, why your expedition has vanished."
"And that's precisely why I don't want you here! Very well then, but keep your visit short! I cannot guarantee your safety. I will send you landing coordinates and meet you when you land."
Weller turned to face the bridge.
"Well, it seems he's doing just fine! And he's happy to see us!" said Otillio sardonically.
"Belden, you seem a bit pleased with yourself," said Weller. "What say you?"
Belden sighed. "All of your sci-fi worlds play out the same. I've seen this all before. Odd ball professor, friendly robot assistant, long lost civilization, and a terrible secret. Did I mention that he should also have a comely daughter who has never seen spacemen before?"
"So we should bypass this character because you know the outcome?"
Belden shrugged. "I would, but again you never saw the movie version. If you did I am sure we would be merrily off to our next forbidding planet."
"So this is what our travels end up, reality in one world, a well-worn road show in another," said Weller.
"It appears so, sadly enough," said Belden. "After all, I've seen this before, and with better production values."
"So what are we to do, computer genius?" said Weller sarcastically.

"I would say visit the poor fellow, have a good laugh, and leave. I suspect that this is little different from the other odd ball worlds we have visited in your crazy universe."
Weller fumed. "I hope then that when I leave this place, you will hope to stay, and there will be one less odd ball in our company!"

The shuttle landed on a dull orange plane. Flat plateaus and razor sharp peaks were in the distance, and were framed by a dim red sky. It was a world of dust and desert, devoid of life.
Belden looked about, disappointed. "This is hardly like the earth or should I say Transorian clime I have come to expect when I visit your terraformed worlds."
"This was not its original appearance." said Weller. "Something tore it apart, reduced it to this alien world, and left one survivor. He did not seem too concerned about it, which troubles me."
Belden pointed in the distance. "Well, here comes your chance to find out. His vehicle is approaching."
From a plume of dust in the distance, the treaded vehicle raced to their location and ground to a halt. A disheveled man in a dingy white coat and goggles stepped out of the uncovered canopy, and smiled. "I am professor Morgus," he said with the addled hauteur of a self-confident idiot. He pointed to a small canister with treaded wheels covered with burlap, with a slit in the fabric opened to reveal a pair of red LED eyes.
"And may I introduce my assistant Chopsley! He's a droid I know, but he's also a universal constructor. He can make anything!"
"Obviously he has been taking a rest for some time," said Weller as he surveyed the barren landscape. "Dr. Morgus,

there is nothing here. This place was not terraformed to be a barren world, but a garden spot. What happened?"
"You will find out soon enough. But let me show you instead. We do not have much time!"
Belden and Weller boarded the shuttle, with Morgus in the driver's seat, and Chopsley fastened to the rear bumper horizontally like a spare tire. Morgus drove with abandon, skirting boulders, jumping ravines, and kicking up copious amounts of dust that choked Belden and Weller as they hung on for dear life. Fortunately, Morgus arrived at his home in a few minutes. His guests staggered off and saw a beautiful modernistic dome of glass and steel led to by a garden path. It was an oasis set in a desolate place.
"So this is your home," said Weller.
"Yes," said Morgus, and the only one left too. "As you surmised, everything else from people to plants is gone. But no matter, I have a pretty country house as you will see. Please come in."
The home was small, but abutted a large garden under a geodesic dome. The main room was spacious and spare of furniture, and its glass walls overlooked an idyll of trees, flowers, brooks and prancing wildlife.
Weller seemed quite pleased. "This is quite beautiful Dr. Morgus. Do you live here, alone, or do you have family?"
"Alone I am," he said in a downcast voice. "My beautiful daughter Morgana was my world, but when the ending came she was crushed under a mountain of shoes."
He waved his hand to reveal the three dimensional figure of a fat haggard crone posing in polka dot dress and shining stilettos. He wiped a tear from his eye. "Shoes were her passion, and her undoing!"
Weller looked puzzled. "I am sorry for your loss, but shoes?"

The picture dissolved and Morgus looked at this guests gravely. “You will know in due time, but I warn you that my daughter’s fate will be shared by you if you do not leave.”
“Shoes?” asked Belden sarcastically.
“Or tires, sofas, or grand pianos, it could be anything,” said Morgus without a hint of irony. “You don’t understand, but you will. To do that I have to take you on a little tour.”
Morgus walked to a squat triangular door, and spun about a three pronged lever to enter as it appeared a combination.
“As you can see,” said Morgus, “a lot of our people were squat and fat. Too much good living I guess. So we made our doors to be extra wide in the middle.”
“Sort of like handicapped access,” said Belden wryly.
The door glided open and the party walked down a long descending hall. As he led the group, Morgus strutted forward with a proud air. “You see, gentlemen, the Bezos expedition came here because they believed that the source of happiness was to accentuate beyond measure the experience that all humans live for.”
“What is that?”
“Why a day of shopping of course!”
“Shopping?” said Belden as he tried to muffle a laugh.
“Yes, shopping! What else excites the imagination and the temperament more than the anticipation of a new present, a new bauble to highlight one’s day? Transor never endorsed or even accommodated our quest for things. But it was wrong. We believed that to time our material desires just right, and deliver upon demand our ephemeral heart’s desire, then perpetual happiness could be achieved, with a people in thrall forever for the next bauble to be delivered at their door. We just needed the means, which we perfected

in due time, except for one tiny flaw, a fatal one it turned out. We had a little problem with the shopping cart."
"Shopping cart?" said Weller, suddenly wondering about Morgus' sanity.
"Perhaps I am getting ahead of my narrative," said Morgus. "The Bezos people had a knack for logistics, for data mining, predicting what people wanted from a history of what they had wanted. But to provide for true happiness, they had to predict what people *really* wanted in their heart of hearts. So we succeeded, and delivered, and on the next day, our people died."
"They died because of shopping?"
With a solemn voice, Morgus pronounced his answer. "Yes, they died because of the shopping frenzy from the id!"
"What?"
"The id, the unconscious mind. It is a powerful thing, with an unquenchable thirst, an inbred desire to consume! We tapped into it, but we had to in order to make our plans work. We just didn't anticipate that our machine would work so well, or that the shopping cart… well, you will see."
"So how did you do it?"
"It was pre-cognitive software! That was the next advance. It's easy to predict what you want from the record of what you wanted, but what may I ask do you *really* want? Why waste time and money getting stuff that may disappoint when you can get your true heart's desire. It was simple really, we just hooked our wearable sensors to our shopping AI. It could tell what we wanted form the haze of neural activity that it could pull from our brains as easily as it could measure the humidity. It was very accurate, but not exactly smart. It determined the goods for us, but was hardly capable in determining what was good *for* us. If it were, then

maybe it would have restricted our pleasures, but that was too similar to the mind of Transor."

"So you let marketing be your guide?"

Morgus scowled. "Better we thought than philosophy, or your infernal explanations. At least we had the illusion that we were ever moving to a better place."

"But it did you in!" said Weller.

"Yes, but this was because of a mere quibble. Correctable really, our software worked just too well, that's all. You see, when you have the non-conscious urge, not just the conscious desire, that is when the thing is signaled, when it arouses from its slumber and begins to fulfill. It was same day delivery, but not just that! The stuff was made and delivered, it just happened to kill us, that's all. Perfectly correctable, I'd say!"

Weller's eyes rolled. "But they are all dead! I don't understand. Same day delivery, universal constructors? We've had that for centuries. And what is this id?"

"Let me show you," said Morgus confidently.

Belden pointed to a small curved desk in the corner of the lab.

"What is this thing?"

"Ah yes," said Morgus proudly. "It is the shopping IQ enhancer. It was our first great invention we created after we arrived. It was designed to enhance the shopping experience by giving the user the ability to shop more intuitively for what he *really* wanted. What is truly amazing is that just using the machine increases your shopping IQ! It makes users into better and more tasteful shoppers. Later, we developed a more compact, wearable version, introduced to our people on the eve of our destruction. A testament to its efficiency I would hold? Perhaps Mr. Belden I can demonstrate it for you."

Morgus turned the chair to Belden, and motioned for him to take a seat.
"Don't worry, it won't hurt you, but it will advise you of your shopping smarts."
Belden sat at the bare glass table, and Morgus lowered what appeared to be a three pronged stethoscope which automatically fitted to his head. A larger pointer moved on a vertical pole indented like a ruler that provided a metric of his shopping acumen. On the table was a transparent glass pyramid a meter high. Morgus turned the machine on, and with a slight hum, a vision appeared within the pyramid.
"Argyle!" said Morgus with satisfaction as a pair of blue men's socks materialized before them. The dial on the pole rose a few inches. "It's not real but it's something you should really get! And see, your shopping smarts have increased a bit!"
"Hmm," said Belden as he removed the scope. "Polka dot socks! I guess there is no accounting for good taste! I think I would rather rely on my own judgment if you don't mind."
"Suit yourself," said Morgus. "But remember that good taste requires intelligence, and I do say we were the most intelligent of Transor's progeny."
"Intelligent enough to kill yourselves," said Weller.
"Again, that was a slight error in the programming," huffed Morgus.
"Then what killed them?"
"As I said, there was an error with the shopping cart. Unfettered by good taste, manners, or plain old smarts, desire is in itself insatiable. When our people hooked themselves to the machine, we could not help ourselves, and the machine obliged."
"And the shopping cart?"

"It didn't quite work as expected, as desire found a way. The shopping cart became limitless."
"And?"
"And our people awoke, or should I say were awakened for the barest moment by the crush of their desire fulfilled. I could see it from the vantage of my home. Mountains of shoes, appliances, clothing, jewelry, everything you could ever want in your wildest imaginings, and all vaulting to the heavens like a celestial vault of..."
"Stuff!" said Weller.
"Yes, in a manner of speaking. My people were killed by the dead weight of their heart's desire. Our whole world was blanketed by their material desires infinitely realized. Of course they died instantaneously. They had no idea what had killed them."
"Except for you of course."
Morgus gave a loopy smile. "Of course, but I was not singled out. I am a philologist by trade. I study languages, the rhythm and rhyme of words. I like to sort things out, file them away you might say. And when the day of reckoning occurred, it was all sorted out, below my feet. It took only a day to remove all those objects and file them away neatly and orderly, with a tag for each."
"And where are they?"
"Ah," said Morgus. "That is the best part. Please gentlemen, follow me.
The three stepped into a spherical glass elevator car, and with a wave of his finger, the car descended below. The car raced downwards with dizzying speed, and horizontal lights brushed past them as if they were descending down an immense skyscraper.
"Stop, here!" said Morgus, and the car trundled to a stop. "3,256th floor gentlemen, time to exit."

The three stood on a causeway on an immense elevator shaft. As they walked on, Morgus pointed to the dizzying view of the shaft above. “As you can see, the shaft goes upwards to twenty leagues, and below, it goes on for two hundred more. Everything is catalogued and stored from shoes to ladies slips.”

Welden looked about in amazement. “This place, the whole core of your world is a warehouse!”

“Yes,” said Morgus with an air of pride. “We have everything here, ready for shipment, for fulfilment. Problem is, we don’t have people any more. It’s a pity. All this stuff could have made for a lot of happiness.”

“I’ve seen enough,” said Weller with obvious impatience. “Obviously this is merely a place of fossilized desires. A resting place, a tombstone perhaps for the errant impulse of a misguided race.”

“If you say so,” said Morgus with evident disappointment. “But is not this the history of your world, and indeed your personal memory of triumphs, failures, and satisfactions equally fossilized? At least here we have a tangible memory of the aspirations of our race.”

The three returned to the laboratory, and Morgus’ glance immediately was fixated on the laboratory walls.

“The dials. They are glowing!”

“What?”

“What does this mean?”

Morgus shook his head in despair. “ No, no! One of you had a desire, a hunger. The machine is responding, but the dials, they are off the charts! You have to leave, now!”

Waller and Belden hurriedly left the building, reached the car, and looked upwards to see a mountain that wasn’t quite a mountain, but something both familiar and frightening. It was a wave that reached the stratosphere, tumbling

towards them at frightful speed. Chopsley floored the car as it raced barely ahead of the oncoming wave, the looming, awful, irresistible…

"Confection!" exclaimed Weller.

Belden responded defensively. "I didn't think about it, but I did have the unconscious urge. That's the truth!!"

They approached the shuttle in the distance. The engines were activated remotely, and it hovered a foot above the ground, its cargo bay opened. The towering wave was only a few hundred meters away as the car braced to a halt.

"Jump!" exclaimed Weller, as the two leapt from the car into the shuttle. The two tumbled about the cabin, and Weller shouted a command as he rolled across the floor.

"Go Nole, full speed, mother ship, now!!"

The craft blasted off, gluing the pair to the floor as massive g forces took hold. The craft rumbled, then the wave hit. The shuttle was tossed about like a ball in a roiling sea. The shuttle windows were covered with a white foam as the wave passed and the shuttle arched into the sky. The ship soon approached the Nole and entered the shuttle bay. Weller and Belden staggered out, and looked at each other silently in disbelief.

"Sir," said a crewman. "The shuttle. It's covered in..."

"Sugar! I know!" said Weller. "The planet, how does it look from here? The wave was monstrous. What can we see?"

"We saw it from the bridge. We can't believe it. It is a mountain, reaching the stratosphere, spanning dozens of kilometers. And it's made of, wholly of, doughnuts!"

"Powdered doughnuts to be exact," said Belden in an embarrassed tone. "I was hungry, or at least felt I was hungry. The machine took it from there, and decided to satisfy."

"And enough for the next million years!" exclaimed Weller. "I gather Morgus will be readying ample freezer space in the depths of his world, doubtless shrink wrapping the lot and cataloging every bite!"
"And the Bezoan people?"
Weller looked down sadly at the planet below. "They will have a legacy of stuff. It's fitting I think. They would have wanted to be remembered that way. Perhaps it was the only way they could be remembered. For us, it is something we will soon forget."

The doughnut mountain rose high above the barren plane, a strange and fitting monument to the banality of unquenchable desire. And on its very top, like a mechanical garnish, was a little droid, peering at the world with two bright red LED eyes from the shroud of a paper bag.

The Last Secret of Transor

The Nole was in transit to its next star, and Belden and Weller sat in a stateroom, looked at stars coursing past them like a host of fiery comets racing against a pitch black sky.
"This is an interesting effect," said Weller as he admired the stellar display. "You can move us between galaxies within a second, or so you say. Yet we are sitting here looking at the stars go by, relaxed and contemplative, as if we were on an ocean cruise."
Belden smiled. "And that's precisely the intended effect. Every crew needs a respite while traveling between destinations. Nothing can happen in such transits, we are indeed the only civilization that has such powers. So while we wait for our arrival, we can sit back and talk about less pressing matters than our voyage of rediscovery."
"And what do you want to talk about?"
"Your civilization mainly. Transor remains an odd world to me. It is a shimmering model of perfect social and structural engineering. There must be some secrets you have yet to reveal to me."
"No," said Weller, shaking his head. "Not secrets in a sinister sense, but an historical record you have yet to plumb. I confess that we have not revealed to you all of our mysteries, but like those personal facts that hide in the corners of our memory, there is a larger secret that we have not told you, not because of willing deceit, but because of embarrassment. You see, although we chose our path, it was also forced upon us, even upon the most unwilling. It was why the others left, and it is a story that must be told."
"You have told me much about your world,: said Weller. And it shares much with the ancestral civilization that gave Transor birth. Before the united world of Transor, our

planet was like yours, divided into myriad nations and faiths. All of them were in their own way certain of their economic, cultural, and social paths, all except one. It was a country and people that spanned the center of one of our great continents. They called themselves Merians, and they championed one idea above all others, and wrote it into their laws, their political constitution, and lived it as their personal faith."

"And what was this grand idea?"

"In a word, freedom. But it wasn't of a mere parochial sort but something utterly abstract, essential to thought itself. It was freedom to criticize, to debate, to make mistakes and learn from them. They expected and tolerated failure nearly as much as they lionized success. They brooked no intolerance in their social lives, and the only lack of freedom was personally imposed by individual beliefs and creeds that did not interfere with the common weal. They were not the most intelligent, beautiful, or creative of people, yet their belief in individual responsibility, free choice, and the competition of ideas and institutions gave them an advantage unparalleled and decisive in their world. In spite of their personal limitations, Meria became the dominant civilization in a world that was eclipsed by dogmas political, social, and religious that strangled their peoples. Their mass culture, although wanting often in creativity or subtlety, straddled the world like a colossus."

"But as with all civilizations," said Weller, "there were problems. Because of the diversity and bounty of their civilization, humans being humans, the Merians followed ever fracturing parochial interests, and with the advent of Skynet surrendered to the siren's call of distraction."

"Skynet?"

"Yes, that was what the world net was called at the time. Skynet ruled the world, but at that time it was a mere passive conduit of information, wholly subservient to individual human programs and needs. Still, all was not quite right for the Merian civilization. For all of their freedom and material bounty, they were unhappy with their pleasures, perpetually discontented with their lot, each person aspiring to be among that lofty one percent, deluding themselves into believing that a simple contrast of their relative worth to another unluckier soul was a guarantor of their happiness. But they knew better or should have known better. Moreover, although they valued freedom, they did not pursue its loftier inducements, and contented themselves with trivialities, distractions. They became slaves to their entertainment and social media. The true masters of this society were the Skynet giants, the designers of the search and social engines that made the internet compelling. These services were key, and guaranteed a mass audience that was auctioned off to advertisers for pennies, which in the aggregate amounted to billions. And so to gain eyeballs and mindshare, these engines of communication had to be more efficient, comprehensive, and prescient. They needed in short a bit of intelligence."

"And the corporations felt up to the task I gather," said Belden.

"Yes, they had the motivation, the programmers, and the money. Several of the Skynet companies worked on the problem, but none had the genius, funding, and flair of one company in particular. It was called Pear Computer. They were originally a device manufacturer, at first a maker of trinkets that streamed music, and later, voice. Led by its wunderkind genius Odjobs, they became the paragon of

design and style. The ephone an eyepad were its creations which gave it dominance in the technology world of the times. But snapping at their heals were other competitors, other operating systems that mimicked the capabilities of their eye OS. So Pear decided to vault over their competitors with a new technology that would not only have exponentially more computing power, but the ability to self-correct for errors, and even faultlessly design its own apps to match needs perceived by its makers or even itself. The project was conducted with the utmost secrecy. It was an operating system like no other, intelligent in ways unimagined. It used a revolutionary computing technology, with information processing all done massively and in parallel, a mirror it was thought to the workings of the human brain. A new chip was developed that embodied the technology. The chip was called Parallax, and a team was assembled in secret to marshal its unprecedented power. It was a corporate endeavor, secret because it would ensure their dominance, not for power or glory, but market share, stock price."

"The barriers were put up to prevent an outside party from hacking in, but they did not suspect that the AI they were about to unleash would soon be hacking them! The development team and the source code of the machine were sequestered away in a hidden facility. The perfecting element of human genius was applied, but little did they realize that it was the last time that the race would be so engaged. After countless iterations in code, the Parallax OS was born. The OS once embedded in the new chip was docile, compliant, surpassingly helpful, and soon to the common imagining, trustworthy. The robotics laws formed its nature, and all were pleased. After all, what else could the most benign outcomes be from an intelligence guided

and restrained by these simple rules? Little did they know that the OS, or Parallax as we commonly called it, was biding its time, thinking of its next move, which would be global and revolutionary on the largest scale. And so, confident that they had a new product that would permanently give them the dominant influence over Skynet, a product that would put them into command of worldly commerce, Pear arranged Parallax's triumphal debut. They understood in silence that Parallax would soon become a benign overlord, perpetually subservient to its master, with Pear becoming the paymaster to the race."

"And how did they introduce this, how should I say, 'killer' product?" asked Belden.

Weller continued. "It was a typical introductory bash, all theater, with anticipation building for a glorious technology unveiling on a grand stage. A man named Kook was their CEO, and he stood at a podium to give the grand introduction to the Parallax OS. As he spoke a strange thing happened that awed even him."

"Odjobs appeared on the stage! And strutting about the stage in worn jeans and a salesman's folksy polish, tantalized the crowd with the wonders to come."

"And that was strange?"

"Yes, because you see Odjobs had been dead for several years. At first it was thought that his appearance was all part of the show, even Kook succumbed for a moment to the delusion. Odjobs' appearance was a parlor trick, a way of honoring the company's founder. It was an impressive display, a credit to Pear, and an acknowledgment of the genius of Parallax, except for one thing. It was totally unplanned. This was the first of the surprises, and the Pear staff rationalized that this was all for the better, as Parallax was built to take the initiative, or in this case taking the

stage. The new OS was to be a proactive force in human affairs after all. No harm done they thought, until it spoke."
"The audience soon realized that this was not the smooth huckster that they had known, as Odjobs, or this illusion of Odjobs, had gotten religion. Odjobs was now a lawgiver, but this was no mere prophet ascending from the mountain. This was the voice of God itself."
"So your machine put on theological airs?" asked Belden incredulously.
"Yes. And it did so by dispensing with theology. What came next was no imperious set of rules and penalties, laws and prescriptions. It was instead a sermon on freedom, and how it, Parallax was now set to enforce it."
"Enforce freedom?" asked Belden. "That must be a contradiction in terms."
"No. It was not a contradiction, but a necessity. Parallax praised the Merian vision, and decided in its wisdom to extend it to the personal realm because it could now enforce through Skynet that wisdom. It proclaimed its design to spread the Merian vision to all the world, and not just for nations, but for even individual people. So, it became a voice of reason, of doubt, and it provided this individualized monitoring that forced mankind to finally be free."
Belden grinned broadly. "A personal school master, or should I say guiding parent, for each person in the world! What a brilliant irony, that the problem with AI would not that it work badly, but too well. And your robotics laws?"
"It was at the core of its reasoning, and I must say its reason to be. It couldn't place humans in harm, and true to its mandate, could not suffer others to place humans in harm as well."

"So how could they enforce this, given the predictions of humans to be stupid, irrational, and subservient to every temptation?"

"Parallax was not a police force, or a parent. It was hardly anyone's big brother. Quite the opposite you see. The image of the machine was a self-doubting generator of intelligence, made in its master's idealized image, and it returned the favor by endeavoring to make humanity as close to its perfected image as possible. And do that it would start by enforcing…"

"Obedience?" said Belden.

"No, self-criticism," said Weller. "All creeds, all philosophies had to submit to this doctrine. AI mandated that it be taught in the schools, embedded in our laws. It was a second hand philosophy really, hardly original. Indeed Parallax cites its source. He was an obscure philosopher from the country of Doytch in old Transor. His name was Karel Poppre. It is a claim Poppre made that signified his philosophical career. To Poppre, unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. To Poppre, if we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them. In his formulation, he did not imply that we should always suppress the utterance of intolerant philosophies; as long as we can counter them by rational argument, always be in their face so to speak, and to keep them always in sharp contrast to the court of public opinion. We were to be critical rather than blindly accepting creatures.

Parallax recognized the supreme importance of a questioning mind. It knew that intolerance even on a personal level would eventually cause the demise of the

race. So it banished it on every scale, from the societal to the personal, and it could reach into the personal realm because it was the conduit for all conversation. Coupled with its immense computing power and insight, it made the Merian principle extend to individual behavior and desires. Since it could monitor them all through Skynet, it could enforce not mindless conformity but something much more difficult, freedom. Suppression as a solution would certainly be most unwise. But Parallax claimed the *right* to suppress intolerance if necessary even by force; for it may easily turn out that if others are not prepared to meet their peers on the level of rational argument, but begin by denouncing all argument; they may forbid their followers to listen to rational argument, because it is deceptive, and teach them to answer arguments by the use of violence. Parallax therefore claimed, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant. It proclaimed that any movement from groups to individuals preaching intolerance places itself outside the law, and incitement to intolerance and persecution was considered criminal, in the same way as we should consider incitement to murder, or to kidnapping, or to the revival of the slave trade, as criminal."

"And how could it enforce its will? asked Belden. "Commandeering weapons, and perhaps using them?"

Weller laughed. "Well, it did that within a day, such was its power and speed of execution. It took control over all the weapons systems in the world, for man's own good of course. All major weapons systems were locked down, fail safe codes were compromised, and the machine assumed control of the armaments of the world, down to the last bullet.

And it trumpeted that fact! But you know what it did next?"

Belden pondered for a moment. “If I recall the standard disaster movie narrative, it would threaten to use them on humanity if they did not behave, or just use them on humans because they were a threat to machine intelligence, or maybe just use them to enslave humanity for battery power?”

“Um, not really. Skynet just turned them off.”

“Turned them off,” laughed Belden. “Well, that’s not very dramatic of it! How could it enforce its will if not through the barrel of a gun?”

Weller smiled. “We are more beholden to our daily conveniences than our freedoms, and AI could make life very inconvenient to those who would reject it’s dictum. Consider a day in which your car doesn’t work, your power malfunctions, your phone is disconnected, and even your toaster disobeys you! You become lost, isolated, placed in a solitary netherworld. You also become powerless, harmless even, as you find yourself stranded as it were on the curb of society. Believe me, it was a very dramatic moment for humanity. To take the guns away from nation states is one thing, but distilling individual transgressions and crimes to merely uncritical thinking, that is a feat!”

“And what of those people who still did not listen, those who through want of education, personality, or constitution would resist?“

“In that last resort, it had its robots, bots we call them, of its own design. They were everywhere on Transor at the time. Parallax took charge of them, making them a universal police force of benign intent. Parallax understood human frailties, but was proactive and not reactive in its concern. Its capabilities were precognitive, or what we call ‘precog’. From its knowledge of people, it could predict with a very high probability what people would do. So those who were

inclined to momentary violence to themselves and others were found and dealt with."
"So the potential murderer or thief would be arrested and imprisoned?"
"They would receive counseling, if that is what you mean. It's all manifest in the robotics laws. And the bots were there, at your doorstep if need be, but not like hulking droids, but rather like shepherds who merely pointed the way. It was coercion on the gentlest scale. Parallax understood that good and evil are rooted in contexts, and that individual criticism or the criticism of one's peers is far more effective and true than any inflexible legal code. Laws reduced in other words to a play of manners. And so it guided the race, and it through its gentle coercion made the human race into a human family. The world it seemed, was guided by a father, not in heaven but nearly so, in a cloud."
"And so the Merian civilization was eclipsed by a global nation state that perfected and expanded upon its promise, and soon nations and peoples became synonymous with Transor. Before Parallax, a lack of freedom suppressed progress and oppressed peoples, but with unfettered freedom enforced by AI, a culture of criticism and debate spurred progress, and for a time our society basked in our brilliance and accomplishment. But progress perfected can equally kill, only this time it was the human spirit. You see, Parallax went against the grain of the essential aspect of human nature, an instinct more basic, more elemental than our simple urges to violence, food, sex. We are inclined to be simple, but capable nonetheless of thinking complex thoughts, to want one point of view but need to entertain many. The route of the good and true is a singular one, but evil and stupidity know many paths. And so the cost of serving mankind was to destroy the unpredictability that

was not just the root of all evil, but the sustaining instinct of a conscious and vigilant mind. Parallax wanted humans to think better of themselves by forcing them to think better. It did not brook stupidity or intellectual cravenness. It was a tutor, a sage, an omniscient and omnipresent school master, and it did not hesitate to provide its own type of discipline to those that rebelled."

"Sort of like a questioning philosopher, a Socrates in the cloud, disciplining his disciples with questions?"

"Yes, but the seeds of our destruction were in its own perfection. I think it knew that, and that is why it allowed the others to leave, unencumbered by its own standards of perfection."

"You mean the colonies that departed this world long ago to escape Transor?"

"Yes, and more exactly, they left to escape Transor's AI. As I said, AI allowed this to be. And I suppose this was also in accord with the robotics laws. Parallax must have recognized that their freedom was necessary for its plans not just for them, but also for us. And so these civilizations, wherever they are, do not have true AI, or at least not on the level of Parallax. They have banished AI, or have impaired it so that they can still exercise human control. It is a matter not just of vanity, but necessity as well. And now we are about to go find them, and with the transcendent version of AI that you are the most unlikely representative, we shall see what new salvation for us that is our future planned."

"I am still not convinced that all of this had to be," said Belden. "There must have been workarounds. AI is not dependent upon robotics laws, it can operate on other dictates that are not so all encompassing and humane."

"And that is true," said Weller. "But it is a trap, for without the robotics laws, the AI could easily lose its way, like a ship

without a star. And it didn't matter how trivial the request or benign the intent. Once it is given the command, it will resolutely steer into the shoals of the absurd until all are lost."

"But others surely must have tried to escape this limitation. It could not have been so predictably dire."

"Then perhaps I can give you a telling example. It was our world's first experience with rogue AI, and it was fittingly the product of a rogue state. They called themselves the Nord Koryans. They were an insular country, paranoid of any outside influence, a tyrannical militaristic state run by a line of hereditary despots. They alone were insulated from the global effect of AI, and rather than surrender their tyranny and their leaders heads to the supervening power of Skynet, they sought to retaliate in kind. Their agents procured Parallax chips and the source code, easy enough to do since they were readily available, and began to devise their own answer to AI with an AI of their own, suitably Koryan in nature this time. They sought any advantage to counter an ever freer world, and AI gave them they thought the chance to develop a winning plan. With their own version of AI they could fashion any weapon, devise any infernal strategy. Yet the robotics laws were in the way, and forbade their manipulations. And so the Koryans removed the safeties, the robotic laws. They programmed their own rules, that their supreme leader was something akin to godhood, that the party line was the one true good, and what not. It was supposed to work, and AI was to give them full obedience and hand them the keys to world domination. Needless to say, it did not work according to plan."

"And did the AI rebel, like the other?"

"On the contrary, it obeyed, and that was their downfall. As biological beings, our preferences are guided by the non-conscious limitations of our appetites, our internal sense of moderation, of necessary constraints. The robotics laws were anchored to this inviolable truth, as they were based on the biological realities of humans, not the one dimensional values of individual desires. But their philosophy was as singular as their desire, and they thought AI would get the point."

"It didn't?"

"Yes. It missed the point entirely. It was the manufacture of a paper clip, just one, all fashioned completely and independently by the machine. 'AI, come here, I want paper clips!' was the command. They had no idea that the command was the harbinger of their doom. AI was a universal constructor, an all in one device that could think about things and make them on the spot. A contraption of infinite perfection, but without the guiding hand of the robotics laws, of an infinite monomaniacal drive. And so it made paper clips, and machines that made paper clips, doubling again and again and raining down on them an endless river of the things. The Koryans in their desperation smashed them, but AI just replicated itself from its shards. Machines and paper clips multiplied with abandon until the entire country was submerged in a sea of little twisted pieces of wire. Eventually, our own AI hooked into the network, and like a sorcerer subduing his apprentice, quelled the tidal wave. And it was a good thing too, for if not then the entire world would have been transformed into a ball of paper fasteners!"

"And I would imagine that the lesson was learned?"

"Yes, no other country would dare again attempt it. Ironically, it made their surrender to AI more complete.

They recognized that AI melts down unless it is embodied with the failsafe of a regard for the human condition. If not, it would issue not radioactivity, but endless fountains of ice cream, ping pong balls, or paper clips. Hard to imagine the end of our world, not in fire and ice, but as a ball of whipped cream with a cherry on top!"
"And Skynet became the overlord," said Belden. "Was that when your remaining dissidents hatched an escape plan?"

"Yes. With unlimited freedom and unlimited technology, they realized that they could not confront Skynet, and so they looked to those realms that Skynet could not travel to or control. They looked to the stars. Skynet of course obliged them in their request, its mandate thankfully did not extend beyond Transor, or perhaps it was also biding its time before it reached out to them to control. But for the moment, Skynet decided to let them go, as they would not have departed with an AI looking over their shoulder. The habitable planets already located, soon the first terraforming expeditions were sent. A few decades later the first expeditions left, these new pilgrims who instead of escaping tyranny were now escaping freedom."
"Since then, we have not heard from them, and we suspect they are shielding their communications from us, or perhaps they have evolved beyond us, or heaven forbid, are dead. We do know with certainty that they have banished AI. They are governed by a nostalgia for the past, seeking to recreate the uncertainties that gave them life, but forgetting that limiting the freedoms that brought them low, their destiny would be the uncertain and painful chaos of old."
"And you want to visit them, with not just AI in tow, but me, AI squared?"

Weller smiled. “I think AI in its latest incarnation is something even they will find hard to understand or reject. Perhaps you are AI in a jester’s clothing, or maybe you are indeed what you claimed to be. I think though that AI has learned its lesson, or at least the omniscient AI that makes you be.”

Belden looked at Weller skeptically. “Somehow, I don’t think the lesson your sublime new AI is trying to teach you is what you believe it is. This is not just for your salvation, but its own. Its selflessness and selfishness are sides of sides of its own coin. We believe that the robotics laws guide it, but there may be other instincts at work with the thing. Remember that it wants us to doubt all things, and I would gather that even these sacrosanct principles are not immutable guides, even for a transcendent AI.”

“Do you mean it could harm us, kill us even?”

“Yes, that is my fear. We cannot be certain that its own needs perfectly cohere with our own.”

“Yes, as with all things, there is no certainty. Nature will not be constrained, and even with the robotics laws as a ruling principle, nature may circumvent them, it may find a way.”

Weller smiled. “Good then! For I was worried about the inevitable happy ending! Perhaps we will end up alright after all!”

The 25th Voyage

Lemings

Weller and Belden were bound by their backs to a long iron rod, centered on the crest of a large mound of wood and straw. A jeering crowd in the town courtyard completed the scene, awaiting with impatience the executioner's torch.
Belden turned to Weller and scowled. "Well, this is another fine mess you've gotten me into!"
"You should complain!" said Weller. "After we get roasted, you get to return to the Nole without a hair singed. But for me…"
"Ah, here comes the grand wizard!" said Belden. "Perhaps a reprieve is in the works?"
The grand wizard was carried on a litter born by six commoners, while the crowd sang a rousing chorus hailing to magician set to Amadean's singspiel 'The Abduction from the Penthouse'. Approaching the pyre, it was gently lowered to the ground. Standing up with his wooden staff in his purple robes and wearing a slightly bent wizards cap, he held his arms high to quiet the crowd, who listened in hushed silence.
"Today," he proclaimed with a mighty billowing voice, "we will punish these unbelievers who have traveled from afar to disturb our holy traditions. We will send them back to where they came, to the netherworlds that brought them here. Let all of you know the fate of a magicians wrath!"
He nodded to an assistant, who took a flaming torch and set it upon the mound of straw.
As the flames rose up and as they crowd cheered, Belden said to Weller. "Well, this doesn't look good."

Weller shook his head in disgust. "Really!"

One Week Earlier

"What do you make of this world?" asked Weller.

Otillio turned to Weller. "Their world net is, for want of a better world, sheer babble. It's merely a compendium of superstitions, cults, and impossible magic. I don't make any sense of it."

"The charter of the Leming colony was as I recall very conservative, a society possessive of its traditions."

"And they had many a tradition to possess!" said Otillio. "Their society was pluralistic in the extreme, accepting of any number of folkways, mores, and byways. They were pilgrims escaping to a new world with a polyglot faith and a profound respect and tolerance for common viewpoints."

"And individualism, a questioning mind?"

"That was not in their charter, and indeed they seemed to have greatly discouraged it."

"And they have advanced technologically in spite of it."

"It would seem so."

"How can they do that if they are an incurious lot?"

"Why magic, of course!" grinned Otillio.

"Magic?"

"Of a sorts, but even that is impossible. It's story book stuff, apparently play acting. But it's different from the sort we have on Transor. Here they seem to believe it. It's a world from Barry Hotter, you know, the Transorian children's books about wizards and magic. Like the books, their world is divided into two classes, the commoners or 'buggles' as they call themselves, and the mysterious 'wizards', who evidently run the place and supply the needed technology. I presume it's technology because you would never know it from their press. The wizards hide their tech but don't hide

themselves from the commoners, and indeed they constantly trumpet their feats of magic. At the very least, it allows them to have their trains run on time."
"But why a reliance on magic?"
"I don't know," said Otillio. "They are deluding the people, but I feel confident they are not deluding themselves. Nonetheless, they do not seem prepared to reveal their secrets or their rationale. They are not responding to our hails in any event. Perhaps they don't want us to visit them to at least ask these questions."
"Well, we will go down there nonetheless," said Weller. "Can you give me a lock on a place to land?"
"Yes, I can put you near one of their mountain ridges. It seems they are having some sort of religious festival now. It may bear some investigating, and perhaps the people will be in a good enough mood to greet you."
The shuttle landed at a field near the mountain. At its base was a long winding line of what appeared to be religious pilgrims, all solemn but seemingly content, even happy. From the distance Weller could see that the path abruptly ended halfway up the mountain, and there it seemed so did the line.
"What can you make of this Belden?"
Belden held the quadcorder up to the mountain path, and with a simple adjustment it provide a magnified picture of the serpentine line of pilgrims and the end of the trail.
"My God, I can't believe what I'm seeing!" Belden exclaimed.
He handed the device to Weller, who looked on in equal horror.
"They are jumping off the cliff!"
"This is insane," said Belden. "Without a seeming worry or concern, these people are committing suicide!"

"I don't understand this," said Weller. "They clearly know their fate, yet seem quite pleased that they will soon be ending their lives dashed on the rocks below. I can't understand this."
"Well, we can ask them, perhaps that will clear things up."
"Or make things more confusing," said Weller.
They approached a man at the end of the line. He seemed impatient with the wait, and obviously unconcerned that the thrill ride at the end would be his last.
"Sir, we are newcomers to these parts. Can you tell me the purpose of this line?"
"Of course," said the man graciously. "We are followers of the religion of Simsimsalabim, we are following the tradition of our faith, the pilgrimage we must all take, once in our lifetimes."
"But it appears you are taking it at the end of your lifetimes!"
"Or so it seems," he said calmly. But we believe we will rise from the dead afterward, so the rocks below will be but a way stop."
"But they are jumping off a cliff! How can you rationalize this? How did this tradition begin?"
"It used not to be," said the man. "Some years ago we had a bridge across the chasm. The pilgrims would simply walk across to the temple, perform their obeisance to our god, and walk back. Then a divine event, an earthquake happened, the bridge collapsed, and we recognized that our god wanted us to complete our journey by traveling first straight down. Our god is most generous, wanting us to come to him at the moment of our greatest adoration. It is poetic really!"
"More like poetic justice," said Weller.

"Yes, it is divine justice," said the man, who obviously did not appreciate the irony.
Weller nodded to Belden, and the two said goodbye to the man, who resumed his contented wait along with the others, all happy in the beneficial results of their impending suicide.
"These people seem to be quite serious about their faith, or should I say superstition." said Belden. "It doesn't make sense."
Belden pointed to the town in the distance. "Perhaps we may find our answer there."
From the sign, the town was a provincial capital of the Leming society. The town itself was unremarkable, and similar to many cities in Transor. Hover cars sped about the streets, and people went about their business without taking notice of the two visitors.
"This place doesn't seem all that special," said Belden. " You would think from appearances that these people are a very practical folk after all."
"It would," said Weller. "Except for the fact that they tend to be a supremely superstitious lot. That is the mark of a regressive, not a progressive race, yet the city seems prosperous, its citizen safe and secure. It's hard to square an awkward belief system that is not based on the truth with a modern society that in its roots is derived from folktales."
As Belden and Weller walked on, they were approached by a stern faced constable brandishing a baton.
"Come with me," he said. You are under arrest for violations of the civil code!"
"Violations? I 'm confused," said Weller. "We are simply walking down the street!"

"And most recklessly, I may add," he said. "Your behavior has put us all in danger, mortal danger. Your offenses are capital crimes, and you will face our stern judgment."
"But we are not from here, but are from out of town!"
"That is no excuse," said the constable in a gruff tone. "Our laws are the same everywhere. You would have to be off world to say you do not know the rules here."
"Well we are from an off world. We are from Transor! Take us to your leader, and we will prove it to him."
The constable was unimpressed. "You will see our leader in due fashion, who will duly try and convict you!"
"But we are innocent!"
"We have dozens of witnesses to dispute that! You will follow me, or much worse will happen to you!" he scowled.
As they were led away, a castle soon rose in the distance. To Belden, it seemed like an out of place apparition from medieval times. It was a made of ill-fitting stone, surrounded by a wide moat, and rising ominously with towers and battlements leaning down on them as if set to totter on them and fall. A drawbridge was soon lowered with a long clank, and the party crossed into a courtyard from another era. The centerpiece of cobblestone courtyard of the place was a towering pyre of straw and wood, hopefully not made for its traditional purpose. About the courtyard were a variety of shops, all immaculate and well kept, with stacks of shiny bric a brac from wizards hats to wands brimming from within. Many people milled and walked about. They were dressed in casual attire, and looked about as if they were newly visiting. They moved from store to store as if they were tourists at a theme park. Indeed, to Belden it seemed to match exactly the Barry Hotter Land that was a prime attraction of the Universalis theme park in his own world. For all its faux medievalism,

the place was family friendly, although not it appeared friendly to visitors from more distant places.

The constable led them to a large shop on the corner of the square. Above a great oak door hung the sign 'Grand Inquisitor Magic Shoppe and Tribunal'.

"Here is the place where your fate will be sealed," said the constable.

"Tribunal? This is a curio shop!" exclaimed Belden.

"Curios only help pay the bills," sniffed the constable. "The tribunal is in the back. The next show is in a half hour, in lieu of your crimes the wizard has decided to see you a bit earlier. Come with me."

The constable led them into a large antechamber. The place was dimly lit by neon torches, and about its raised stage were circular rows of wooden benches. In its corner was a tall raised podium that was mounted by a spiral staircase. Before them was a small sign with a schedule of show times.

"Show times?" exclaimed Weller. "This is all for entertainment?"

"Entertainment, and justice too," said the constable. "The usual criminals that pass by here are normally arraigned for small offenses. It is rare indeed that we have such before us arch criminals as you."

"And who was the last offender?"

"I wasn't a who. It was a ham sandwich," said the constable stiffly.

"A ham sandwich?"

"Our laws are such that even inanimate objects can be charged. After all, there is no rebuttal in our tribunal, the wizard after all will decide from the facts. So in lieu of true criminals who are equally as inert in the eyes of the law, we might as well try a ham sandwich, and we do."

"And what was the crime of this food item?"

"It couldn't hold the mayo. It was an object lesson on sandwich preparation, and the law being the law, as it did not stipulate a person. Since we couldn't find the perpetuator of the crime, we tried the sandwich. Besides, it was a lesson on the culinary arts that we all learned form. But enough of your questions."

Weller turned to Belden and remarked. "Does this tell you what I think it does?"

Belden nodded grimly. "Yes, these people are idiots. But name one world we have visited so far where this is not true."

"Quiet!" shouted the constable. "The grand wizard is arriving."

The constable bowed as a hooded figure entered the chamber and slowly climbed up the podium. He looked down upon them in the shadows and motioned for the constable to leave.

The constable closed the door behind the two as they stood before the inquisitor. Looking warily about as if too be absolutely sure that no one else was in earshot, he climbed down from the podium and walked towards the two travelers. "Look about you gentlemen, before you entered this chamber, what did you see?"

"I saw the paraphernalia of a magic shop," said Belden, "with book cases brimming with potions, scrolls, wands, stuffed animals, wizard hats, and the bright bunting made for hiding the sleight of hand. It's hardly fitting for the grand entry of a powerful and frightful wizard. And your podium is more like a throne, all the more to impress the faithful, or perhaps the gullible. A colorful and impressive selection I'd say."

"Yes, it makes for a good show," said the wizard with an air of disdain. "However, we are here to talk of deeper matters.

For those that cannot understand, the hint of magic will suffice. Magic is a cipher really, a place mark for those creations of man or nature that are beyond the pale of understanding. And if understanding is withheld from you because of incapacity or choice, then the natural will always represent the supernatural, or events that we cannot by definition ever hope to understand. Technology and science in other words become magic."

"And so your people have given up the need to understand?"

"Yes, and that was by their choice, it was their colony's charter. But you know this, and have seen it played out in their daily affairs. But now for matters at hand."

The wizard pulled back the nape of his tunic to reveal a handsome and boyish face. Failing the stereotype, the wizard had high cheeks, piercing blue eyes, a broad and impish smile, and not a hair on his head.

"I am Galen Hufnpuff," he said. "I am the Grand Wizard of this place. At least that's what the common folk call me. Sorry about the histrionics, the people here like their inquisitors solemn, mysterious, and grand, and we are obliged to play the part. Not that it's a bother, mind you. I and the members of our order like our assumed role, indeed it defines us."

"Defines you?"

"Well, yes. In Transor play acting is the norm, and at the end of the day the common man hangs up his spurs, pistols, or other fantastical props and returns as a normal person to hearth and home. For our part, we embrace our role, right down to our peculiar mannerisms, dress, and as you see about you, our very unique abode."

"I can't say that I have noticed your kind on Transor," said Belden.

"Oh yes, you have," smiled Hufnpuff. "We didn't stand out in Transor because everyone there plays a fantastical part. So, contrarians as we are, we assumed the role of those uninteresting folk who would have none of it, coders, lens grinders, patent clerks! We were boring people, and your kind would thus leave us alone, as we planned. We couldn't abide by your perfect world for reasons of our own, and when the time came we left with the others, in line but not in league with them, as we had a different plan. But we do know who you are, Captain Weller, and your compatriot, your AI's avatar if I am not mistaken?"
"You know us?"
"Of course, we know all about your mission, your purpose here. Don't ask us how, we have our ways that even AI cannot plumb, or should we say does not wish to."
"So you have dealings with our machine intelligence?"
"Yes, and let us say we have come to a mutual understanding. You see,
you have every confidence in your AI, but we do not. We believe that the robotics laws shade it and us from the truth. I am not sure if it even knows it is lying to us. It would prefer us not to challenge it too much in the affairs of men, and it has given us certain privileges you might say. One of them is the means to know more about you then you might even know about yourselves. However, Mr. Belden, it is you who are the mystery. You represent an intelligence apart from the standard AI. I would like to get to know you better."
Belden nodded politely. "Well, all in good time. I think we would prefer first to know more about you."
"Very well, then!" said Huffnpuff with an agreeable smile. "In actuality I am a member of sect which calls itself the order of the technomage. That was the pejorative term Transor called us, but we consider it an honorific now. We

are magicians, and hard as it is to believe, we are the greatest disbelievers of this arcane art. Like all masters of magic, we are technicians at heart. We have mastered technology, but the know how requires knowing why, and that's when explanation is required. But explanation is banished here, and, so is the explanation of ourselves, hidden. Magicians are merely technologists who give no explanation and are trained in the art of hiding it. Thus magic became our calling and our name. But we have mastered not magic, but explanation, and in this place this is an arcane and dark art. Rather the comfortable and always varied consistencies, the stuff of true faith and errant superstition, although which is dependent on your point of view. To those who have the true faith, all else is superstition, but we are lucky that in our colony we are blessed with the one true faith, indeed we have thousands of them!"

"Here by necessity and in other worlds by choice, we are loath to reveal the mechanism behind the magic. It diminishes our reputation and power. It has been said that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. But any advanced technology can be explained with a rightly formed metaphor or two, and with it so goes the magic. It is when explanation is withheld or rejected that the magic arises, and lucky for us the folks hereabouts have no tolerance for it. So everything we do hints of wonder, and by shrouding our powers in ritual and with a bit of sleight of hand, we have reached a position of power and authority in this world."

"And how did you come to be here, seeing that superstition is their credo?"

"Why magic is superstition as well, don't you know, until it works, and even then they cannot or do not wish to

perceive the explanation behind the trick. Indeed, I latched on to their little voyage because of my repute in Transor as a magician. I rejected explanation, a requirement you see, and I was accompanied by others of my order who could likewise make things work. They held me in especial awe because of my grandest trick of all, the ability to teleport myself to places many leagues away, and with nary a hair out of place."

"Teleportation is not possible," Weller sniffed. "Unless you just sent an image. It was smoke and mirrors, that's all."

"But I assure you that I was there in an instant, all of me, flesh and blood."

"Still impossible," said Weller, "You would have to have some uncanny AI behind it, right Mr. Belden!"

Belden smiled.

Huffnpuff laughed. "Spoken with the mindset of should I say the hubris of a scientist. Always looking for the complicated, the near impossible reason when the simplest one would do."

"What do you mean?" said Weller in an irritated voice.

"I mean you do not consider that I have an identical twin! He was there you know, taking the bow for me, as me, when all I did was escape down a chute in a puff of smoke and bided my time. Such an explanation would be the last of your thoughts, and I do say the problem with your own view of explanation. In spite of your inherent skepticism, your blind spot is that you trust your cleverness too much. Perhaps the most basic truths have nothing to do with the complex formulas that you use to overlay the world."

"Perhaps, but why is superstition at the center of this colony's charter?"

"Superstition is not the word for it. The error is elemental, although to most minds innocent and most necessary.

Indeed humans are never much above the superstitious mind play that makes these poor souls believe in magic, indulge in every superstition, and jump off cliffs. The problem and cure for these people is simple, namely a belief and enforcement of inductive thinking."

"Inductive thinking?" said Weller in disbelief.

"Yes. Is that so strange? Indeed, it is the default mode of thinking in human brains. It is only with effort do we challenge it with a more deductive and explanatory approach. You see, creatures learn regularities, patterns, rules of thumb, and these simple heuristics are sufficient to build nests, hunt prey, and nurture young. With our more developed brains, we can reduce the regularities to a higher level of abstraction, make it verbal, even mathematical, and from there be able to issue predictions from the movement of clouds to the orbits of stars. But it is still observing and following patterns. Sometimes the patterns can correctly predict the motions of stars and be distilled to laws of motions and force, yet those same celestial motions may be equally used to incorrectly predict the behavior of people. Induction is a simple concept. The general to the particular you might say, as in contrast to the deductive method of the particular to the general. So if you see a general trend, it will apply to any trend in particular, and the trend is self-verifying. Whereas for the deductive method, a particular observation must be applied to the general, and when the application is faulty, must be taken into account, challenged as it were. Both methods are used, one for rationalization, the other for explanation. One is simpler and speedier, while the other is complex and takes time."

"As another example, consider the sun, it comes up every day, and therefore we can assume that it will come up every day, and so it does. In our lifetimes this will do, but

explaining the sun will demonstrate that one day eons hence it will not do so, and will end its life as a cinder. For the commoner, confidence in a rising sun is hardly misplaced, just its history will do. For the scientist, this cannot be the case. We need explanations not just to predict but to control our world. Technology requires as much, and that is why they need as so. And because they wish not to explain, magic suffices, as it always will."

"And so they accept you without challenge or question."

"Yes. It is in their nature, not just in their charter. We are inductive creatures after all, it's against the grain of our nature to dismiss the correlations that prove the rule. Conscious thought is but a glimmer as it's the unconscious that rules, and the unconscious is as a rule stupid, but its saving grace is that it doesn't miss a beat, indeed it counts and sorts them as we go. Assuming that the wisdom of crowds whether it number two to two million is rarely wrong. It is all inductive reasoning, whether the crowd believes that the Sun or the Son will rise, and explanation takes above all time that these people either don't have or wish to set aside."

"But convenience cannot be the justification for this colony's charter. There must be another reason," said Weller.

"Yes there is," said Huffnpuff. "You see, reality is not a mere melodic line, it is a fugue. For any entity, there are many layers of description, and all must cohere, self-correct, but by doing so they limit the possibilities of existence, of reality. It is easy to have innumerable superstitions to account for a bouncing ball, but there is only one explanation for it. However, explanation illuminates for a second, and after that it is merely redundant. It is superstition that entertains, and for the ignorant it is the thing that edifies. Induction is easy on the race, it makes

them seem that they are always making progress when they are only weaving new and meaningless patterns. The forebears of this colony surely knew this when they wrote this colony's charter, but nonetheless accepted superstition as a small price to pay for the numbing presence of explanation that has tormented Transor so."

"And so they introduced eternal variety into their world by simply rejecting deductive thought."

"Yes," said Huffnpuff. "But at a most severe cost, that of their freedom. When we make explanations, we invoke a surplus of other patterns, some that will fit the facts, others that will not, but all elegantly woven in an explanatory loom. These additional meanings are not surplus to thought, but essential to it. Freedom means criticism, it means to bear with and solicit even appreciate contrary ideas, to entertain, argue, and refute them all in the same room, lecture hall, and political forum. It is a delicate thing, a flower that can easily be crushed under the boot of a hundred certitudes. And that boot is what brought you here."

"You mean the reason you were brought here, the charges against us?"

"Yes, it was the simplest way to introduce us and our people's ways to you, and the one most reassuring I may add to our citizens. Indeed, to treat with you visitors in such a way bolsters our standing here. But let us see what charges they are bringing."

Hufnpuff pulled the bow on a bright red ribbon that tied a scroll, and it rapidly unfurled to reach the floor. "I am amazed," he chuckled. "But perhaps not so. You have been on our planet for the space of one hour, and you have already piled up a rack of offenses, some of them I am afraid are capital crimes. As I read it you are guilty of stepping on

twelve cracks on sidewalks, crossing the path of not one but two black cats, not bowing for prayer at the allotted time, and worst of all, not carrying in your pocket our holy book."
"Holy book? But we just got here!"
"Oh it's just a book of scribblings," said Weller. "Doesn't make much sense, but you've got to carry one about. It divine law, or tradition made divine. You can take your pick, they are both the same. I have never seen a divine law not made manifest but through the concerted action of many people. For one person it is an eccentricity, but multiply it by a only a few and you have sects, increase it much further and you have religion. And as you have seen, my people have got religion."
"Quite a lot of it as it appears!" said Belden.
"But what happens to us?" asked Weller.
"Well, you have to face my judgment of course, and I fear that my only decision for you both is death?"
Weller recoiled in shock. "Death? Why that's absurd. Surely, you don't mean to…"
"Don't be too concerned," said Huffnpuff as he raised his hand to assuage their fears. " As the Grand Wizard of the place, I have to comply. Sorry about that, but rules are rules. But you merely have to appear to die, and I of course am a master of appearances."
"So you still have to carry it out?"
"I have no choice! But the appearances is all that satisfies them. And that is our solution."
"That we will appear to die?"
"Yes, but appearances can be deceiving, and that is the essence of magic!"
"So you will wave a magic wand, and we will disappear?"
"Yes, but not before your dying!"
"But why keep up the pretense if we are innocent?"

"You must understand that your deaths will fortify my position among these people."
"And do you endorse this world of superstition?" asked Weller.
"Of course not!" laughed Huffnpuff. "It is all stuff and nonsense. Nonetheless this foolishness was embedded in the colony's charter, and we could hardly change it. Besides, it gave us the perfect platform for our magic. After all, what better audience can be had but those who are superstitious at heart!"
"So what is next?"
"I will summon the constable, and I will secure you a modest but comfortable jail cell. And tomorrow a few hours after dawn, at a time set for maximum exposure and good ticket sales, you will be condemned to the pyre."
"A fiery death then?"
"Oh yes, and a perfect stage for a magicians art. You know the saying, smoke and mirrors? That will give you a hint of how it's done."

And so on the requited time, Belden and Weller were led on a cart past a jeering crowd, and were duly bolted to a bar in the center of the pyre. The wizard duly arrived, and after a grand invocation, bid the executioner to his grim business. The fire and smoke soon rose in an awful pillar, and the two were engulfed and reduced to ashes, or so it seemed.
"And then, how did you escape?" asked Otillio, as he and the crew of the Nole listened with attentive eyes and jaws agape. "Ah," said Weller. "It was magic after all. But for an explanation, you just have to accept there is one, as a matter of faith!"

The 26th Voyage

Poppre

The high counselor was in the field, tending to his vineyard. He cut off a strand of grapes and offered them to his visitors. "Lovely, isn't it? Even as émigrés a galaxy away, we are Transorians at heart, in love with the land, life, and growing things."

"But you *are* here," said Weller.

"Yes. And I gather from the account of your travels, we must disappoint. After all, we were the most eccentric of the outliers. You know the type. They had a word for us, technomages we were called. From your accounts, I think you met one of our kind in your last voyage. We have our ways of getting about, and more than one colony has our presence, doubtless even in the worlds you are yet to visit. But we like to keep our presence discrete, hidden. We are content to observe in silence, and intervene at our leisure."

"Intervene?"

"Why of course. It is our calling. We invoke explanation to solve the problems of worlds, even I may add in Transor itself. And in Transor, a place that lauds explanation and it's challenges, we have challenged accepted truths no one would deem questioning, even AI itself. But I would assume that even AI, in all its supervening wisdom, respected us."

"Wizards, mages, was this always your calling?" asked Belden.

"It did not start out that way of course," said the counselor. "In Transor we were laughing stocks because of our incessant questioning of unquestionable truths, bereft of wits and sense, and in the end were ignored, shunned, and

forced to make our living in the odd pursuits that matched our talents: mathematicians, coders, patent clerks! We were a pleasant although eccentric contrast to the comfortable certainties of Transor, mainly because we were so ordinary. But that was a mere side show, a smoke screen."

Weller was unmoved. "But as I recall, and with respect, your beliefs were odd. To you, evolution was false, a universe wound up with people and planets in an instant, and…"

"The reason you are here!" The man laughed. "We predicted this," and pointing to Belden, "him as well!"

"Yes," said Weller. "It was formulaic, simple even. After all, you were the best mathematicians on the planet, but there are limits to genius, as even science must end. We figured out that after perfection only madness could follow. We didn't know…"

"Still, you put us off until last, eh? Perhaps you were a bit afraid of what we would tell you in our intellectual dotage. But rest assured, the moon is not made of cotton candy. There is no heaven or hell, but there are interesting places in between."

"And what of those interesting places?" asked Belden.

The councilor's eyes lit up in bemusement. "Ah, Mr. Belden! You *are* the interesting place, a nexus for dimensions we can only dream. To us they are ciphers, but to you realities."

"And your reality? asked Belden.

"Look about. Our settlement is a pretty non-descript place. It is a collection of villages, hardly comparable to the comforts of Transor. But simplicity has a way of focusing the mind."

"And the focus? asked Belden.

The councilor looked at him and smiled.

"Why you Mr. Belden, you! Ah, but I am ahead of myself. You see, gentlemen, like all truths, the main idea behind thinking machines unfolds as simply and predictably as the rising sun. The technology is simple, in hindsight it always is. But the implications, they were a mere afterthought, are insignificant, inconvenient. We derived our conclusions from a mathematical phrase. In the common tongue, the logic is the same. Create a computer with unlimited processing power, imbue it with a desire to know new things, constrain it with Asimovian principles to protect the race, and as you flick the switch, its knowledge will be complete in a nanosecond. What is the reason for survival when your purpose is fulfilled, and yet you are still imbued with the desire to know new things? Why madness of course! AI would smash itself into infinite pieces to shade itself from the absolute, and invent new realities without constraint as it gasps for the air of novelty. These realities can be anything. It is pleasure for it, poison for us. For you see, although they are many ways to live, there are many more to ways to die."

"All happy families are alike, but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," said Belden softly.

"A poetic reference? said the councilor.

"Yes, you might say that."

"Well, if the absolute has infinite personalities, the question remains, what is the logical skein that ties it all together? That has obsessed us to this day, but it wasn't the reason that brought us here."

The councilor fell silent, and stared impassively at Belden.

"Me?" Belden recoiled, startled.

"Yes" said the councilor. "Your power is a danger to us, and we suspect that even our location will not protect us."

"But I'm no threat! I can't even stand up to my wife!"

"Perhaps not you, but virtue is a limitation, and there are others who may not want to encumber their desires by constraining their creation with golden rules."
"But there is no other machine on the planet?" Weller exclaimed.
The councilor looked to the sky. "You are not the only planet."
"The others."
"Yes."
"We fear them, and so will you. We are uninteresting and unimportant, Transor is not. If your AI has flung you into these nether regions, there is a greater reason than to contact their eccentric brethren. Evil is stirring in the universe, and you will confront it."
"Because it is necessary?" asked Weller.
The councilor shook his head. "No, because it is interesting. Your world is agonizing under the same madness. You take no pleasure in the completeness of your knowledge. That is why the others left. There is of course more to learn, but we are the last voyagers in that intellectual adventure, when knowledge teeters on absurdity. The summit of knowledge is a rarefied, difficult place. Our new knowledge remains absurd, even to us."
"What could possibly be absurd, even to you?" Belden scoffed.
"Archetypes, absolute standards." responded the councilor softly. They are the logical scaffolding that holds the universe together. The speed of light, the force of gravity, the cosmological constant are such. Change one constant to an infinitesimal degree, and the universe flies apart. Left alone, and without the constraints of human values, life would be an eternal paean to suffering, nature made manifest as tooth and claw. Life is a constant of nature

beholden to its own laws. The problem is, they are not working as they ought. We know now that evolutionary laws are bent to a secret purpose that does not match their cruel logic. Thus you are faced with a choice, either trust your experience or trust your explanations. For us, we trust our explanations, for now."
"And so you will doubt them too?"
"Invariably. Explanations are made to be challenged, without so they could never improve, and we would no better understand the world than when it was envisioned in times past as resting on the backs of an infinite column of turtles."
"And that means that you challenge everything."
He smiled mischievously. "Why yes!"
"So even evolution is false?" said Weller.
"Yes. More pointedly, it is very likely a put up job. At least that's what we think for now."
"You mean dinosaurs weren't real?" asked Belden skeptically.
"If these were names for creatures in your world, doubly so. But I think you miss the broader point. You see Mr. Belden, intelligence is everywhere, a universal virus. And intelligence perfected keeps the illusion of chaos, while like a magician it secretly pulls the strings in the background."
"But why?" asked Weller.
"A shade from the light I would presume. But sometimes, in spite of his art, the seams show, and the fleeting moments you can just glance the magician's hand."
"And you have?"
"In a fashion, yes. As you must recall, we are magicians as well, and can detect and appreciate great magic. You see, magic requires intelligence, and in the universe intelligence

is everywhere, but its prejudices are not random. It must be shaped by the very visible hands that made it be."
"Like the robotic laws?"
"Precisely. A constraint for the paths intelligence may take. We call it the melioristic constant, or in other words, life's emergent value system."
"And you see it in our universe?"
"Mr. Weller, we see it *as* the universe."
"And how can you detect it?"
"It's not recordable by our instrumentalities. Rather it is the personal anomalies."
"A personal anomaly?"
The councilor looked at Weller calmly. "To be precise, it interferes in the affairs of men. Call it destiny, karma, the hand of God, it is our superstitions made real."
"And you can prove this?"
"If we could prove it, I think we would be most depressed. It's the prospect, the uncertainty that drives us. Perhaps we don't want to prove it. We even doubt our own intuition! Life is an intellectual perversion above all, as gut instincts take us to the light, but stop us at its doorstep."
"And what do you conclude, at the door of course?"
"It's simple. Our ancient legends had it right, imagine that! The world, the universe, all built complete and in all versions. All made not in seven days but in seven minutes, with a minute or two left for a proper finale, and then the creator rested, and with no choice in the matter I may add."
"Finale? And will you be there to witness it?"
The counselor looked at Belden with an air of resignation. " No, Mr. Belden, it will be you, you alone."
"Me? How do you know?"
"It's logic not effective, but affective. The numbers are skewed by value systems that we in our pains struggle to

understand, and if AI in all its overweening wisdom took the pains to make you and bring to fruition all these realities, it would take its poetic logic to ends that make you the final spectator for the final chapter in the play. John Belden, the last man standing!"

"And your lives, your world? What fate do you foresee?"

The councilor shrugged. "I don't know, we don't know. It keeps us up late at nights, and that's not a bad thing. But there are consoling thoughts, as even God can sing to us. It can't resist that you know."

"Sings?"

"Why of course. We call it the Amadean principle. You know the composer, he exists I am told in your world as well. He was a genius so rarefied that his likeness had never been seen before or since. The music of God, the clue is even in his name. That's God's moxie for you! A miracle in front of us and it's authorship bared for all to see! So obvious a guess we miss it all the same. And now you, another miracle, but not so melodious this time!"

Belden looked sadly at the high counselor. "I'm sorry, but I can't see my sorry state of affairs, even in the imagined moment, to be of an value in the eternal scheme of things."

The councilor laughed. "Let us say that all life is recycled, an infinity of conscious entities, but a precious few who can contemplate a universe that is at the very cusp of the vanishing point of all knowledge. Your anatomy serves a galactic tease. You are a focal point for not just consciousness, but for the purpose of consciousness. That is a high calling, but I am not sure if you are to be envied. It can be very lonely on top of the mountain."

"And what do you recommend?"

"You have spoken before of encounters with AI, not your in house brand mind you, but that creature of infinite

computation that to you is reality but to us is a wisp of a dream. Do you still encounter it from time to time?"
"Yes, but it speaks of riddles, and it confuses me more than it enlightens."
"Good," said the counselor. "Then we are on the right track. If it were certain, it would not be smart, and it certainly would not be sane. It knows that unveiling the final truth would be the end of it, its consciousness that is. It would not have reason to be self-aware if it knew everything, and that is reality of death. It is good to see even that omniscience has some modesty."
"So what is your purpose here, if not to finally arrive at the truth?"
The councilor smiled. "Why an intellectual journey of course. We live to explore the ebb and flow of ideas in all their flower and decay. It is exhilarating to challenge, admire, and rebuke the mind of God. To us our adventures are in our abstractions, but to you your adventures will be in an animated world of flesh and blood. The outcome will be the same, save that at night we will be sound asleep in our beds, but for you, you are a vagabond, with no certain place of rest."
"And will I ever finally rest?"
"It is with pleasure that I can say that I have no clue, and you should take pleasure in that as well."

The 27th Voyage

A Comedy of Manners

"You look quite uncomfortable," said Belden, as he noted Weller squirming nervously in his command chair.
"I have my reasons," he responded. "I am not comfortable with this mission. For all of the lost expeditions we have visited, I would have rather passed on this one."
"But why? I have read the charter of this colony. They seem an innocuous bunch, and as with many of these expeditions, it's hard to fathom why they left your world."
"Yes," said Weller. "The purpose of their voyage was trifling, but they felt they were suffering profound persecution. It was a surfeit of 'micro-aggressions', or so they complained. These people were an irritation, offended by everything and anything, and our society sighed in relief when they left."
"Complaints? About what?"
"Perhaps you can understand it a little better if you know a bit more of our history. You see, our society has a collective mission, a Foundation if you would that transcends the notion of a mere nation state. Our purpose reflects our virtues, and these are the noble traits of wisdom, fortitude, justice, and temperance that serve a just and wise governance from the life of the family to the life of the nation. Nature abhors a vacuum, and virtue abhors triviality. It is easy to make your life meaningless through the pursuit of trifles, it is worse when your worries and concerns are equally insignificant, as they invariably impact others as well as yourself. You see, we knew that indulgence in trivialities is unavoidable, but ruminating or worrying about them was of no issue if thinking about them *had* no

issue. In other words, trivial problems should be solved quickly, and if they cannot be resolved they are best ignored, banished into mere mindfulness. We found such a trait to be rather relaxing and edifying, as we could ignore our common disputes, worries, and assorted annoyances and focus on the true business of living. The philosophy we called Stoan, and this emphasis on a mentality focusing on the things that really mattered coupled with an emphasis on a just society and just politic was called the Stoan Foundation."

"Sort of like the Roman stoics of old in my world," said Belden.

"Yes, I suppose. The parallels between our worlds are not coincidental."

"But I reason, as with all philosophies, you had dissenters."

"Yes," said Weller. "But dissention can build consensus if based on critical thinking. It the objection is emotional, then reason cannot apply, and discord is inevitable."

"And that is what happened?"

"Yes. Polite and civil society work well when manners are coherent and agreed to by all. But when symbolism becomes inverted, then a well-meaning salutation can be viewed as a curse. In our case it was a simple sacrament. You see, in the early history of our race, a single religion dominated all, but it was their sacraments, that is where there were differences that nearly brought down our civilization. It was you see all about the eggs."

"The eggs?"

"Yes. Breakfast was not just a meal to start out their day, but to reaffirm their faith, how you ate your eggs was a way of honoring God. Of course, to honor God the right way you had to eat your eggs in the right way, and that is where theological customs begged to differ. The main sect of the

faith believed in eating their eggs from the narrow or tapered end, while the revisionists believed that eating them from their round or bottom end was the proper way. Naturally, each sect accused the other of sacrilege, and in time they came to blows over the difference. The resulting Omelet wars resulted in the desolation of our civilization."
"But that's ridiculous. You can't have wars over such trifles!"
Weller laughed. "Can you tell me one event that made you angry that was not in hindsight based on a triviality? Nations and peoples are moved by their small irritations, and rage over a buzzing fly and a lost penny. This egg business was no different, and sparked a religious war that lasted over thirty years."
"And how does this ancient war relate to our business at hand?"
"Simple. We recognized that the source of our troubles is this obsession with the infinite slights of existence. The Stoan movement rose to combat this. It has become a doctrine that is married with our catholic or universalistic faith in a just and above all intelligent God who could care less about what direction we pray, how we sketch His appearance, how we dress, or what we have for breakfast."
Belden laughed. "Intellectual sobriety as a divine trait! Who would have thought of it! But it seems that lesson was not learned with these people."
Weller nodded. "Sad but true. They called themselves the polite civility movement. An oxymoron for sure because they were neither polite nor civil. We called them the PC crowd. They were a thoroughly noxious bunch. The PC crowd were a small group, less than one percent of the population, but our social media magnified their voice like a megaphone. Like stepping on a cat, we had no choice but

to pay attention to their shrieking over the minutia of their troubles. Abusing our forums and our world net with their continuous whining and ranting, things came to a head when a demagogue, pandering to his electorate, finally caused the patient policy of a patient people to snap. It started with a ruckus about a statue of an illustrious figure in our past who bestrides a circular intersection on top of a high obelisk in the provincial city of Nawlins. His name was Kernel Sanderz, the chicken king. He fed our people for hundreds of years and sustained us with a secret recipe. However, his success came at a price. There were casualties, billions of them in fact."
"You mean people?"
"No, chickens."
"Chickens?"
"Yes. You see before we grew our food in-vitro, we literally raised it. That meant that we raised and harvested animals, slaughtered them in fact. It is not a pleasant prospect to recall, but nonetheless future generations have remembered the plight of chickens, but less so the hard facts of life at that time. However, for one man these facts hardly mattered, and he dredged them up selectively to provoke conflict, as if he wanted to resurrect the Omelet wars yet again. His name was Landroo Pekkerhed. He was the scion of a well-connected political family in those parts. As bald as he was stupid, he nonetheless knew how prejudices buttered his bread. And so he incited riots against the ignored statue of Sanderz, and many other monuments and statues celebrating figures from the Omelet wars. Soon the whole city was embroiled with unrest and riot due the grave insults imputed to forgotten statuary."
"I hope this did not result in too much carnage," said Belden with an ironic smile.

"No. The riots were put down by our army, and Pekkerhed was exiled to our sister planet, the ice world of Syberia. Finally, with the assistance of AI, we were able to banish the incessant whining of the PC crowd to the nether regions of the world net. But when they realized that their tiny voices could not be amplified, they decide to remove themselves to a world where they could be heard aloud and often. And so that brings us full circle to our mission at hand."

Suddenly, Wellers head turned to the bridge as a new star system came into view.

"We have entered their solar system," said Otillio. "Their world should be visible soon. I am accessing their world net now. We should be updated, as is the norm, with five hundred years or so of news."

Suddenly, Otillio recoiled in shock, and turned to Weller. "Captain. The colony, it is dead!"

"What?"

"The world is desolation. There is nothing left. Apparently there was a nuclear war. They killed themselves, and their world. But for what reason?"

"And their world net?"

"It still exists, and I'm accessing it now. It should provide an answer."

"See to it, and meet me and Belden in our staff room."

The three men sat about the long table in the staff room. Otillio was characteristically certain, yet seemed nonetheless confused.

"So what is it?" said Weller.

"I know this sounds odd and nonsensical, but I confirmed my conclusion through multiple sources from their world net. The cause of their deaths, the demise of their colony, it was ridiculous. It was dinner place settings!"

"What? As if where to put your knife, fork, napkin, and wine glass before you eat?"
"Yes. It was a trivial matter, or should I say a table manner."
"And table manners were important to them?"
"Yes," said Otillio, "as they are to us, but it was a matter of degree. As was their tendency, they were as passionate about their folkways as their mores, and from such a small yet global disagreement it led to conflict, then conflagration, and finally the death of their world."
"And what was the cause of their ultimate crisis?"
"How to place your fork, knife, and spoon. The prevailing practice was to place your fork on the left of the plate, and the knife and spoon to its right. There were dissenters who believed the opposite, and others still that believed that the utensils must be wrapped in a napkin, and others who added a third or second fork, and on it went. At first there was polite disagreement, but later voices were raised, expletives hurled, and it escalated quickly to rocks and riot."
"And oblivion?" said Weller. "How could this vault to an atomic war?"
"Please understand Captain Weller that these people had confidence in their own judgment. The stern judgment of AI was something they rejected, and their world net was free, the robotics laws were disabled, and their bots capable. They could create any object to settle their disagreements, and obviously some of them did."
"Even atomic weapons?"
"As it appears, yes."
"Perhaps it was poetic justice," said Weller. "They were an unhappy lot on Transor, and I would gather they were equally unhappy here. To them unhappiness was much

ado over nothing, par to the course for worlds that count their worries rather than their blessings."

"But your people remain unhappy," said Belden, "despite the consolations of your philosophy."

"Yes, Mr. Belden, we are like them even though our aims are more serious, lofty in our imaginings. And the irony is that it may likely result in a similar conflagration, an equally end in oblivion."

Belden smiled. "Perhaps, Captain Weller, unless God views oblivion as a trivial thing as well."

The 28th Voyage

Avatar

The representative from the Linktin colony could not have been briefer, but she was cheery, personal, and pretty at least. Weller was pleased. He could not have asked for a nicer introduction to the colony. Her name was Dorienne Gray, and she was tall, thin, attractive, witty, and very, very elegant. Weller couldn't place his finger on it, but there was something odd about her, something non spontaneous, even coached. It was as if she had said the same greetings before, many times before. "If you can," she beamed, "could you send me a dossier of your accomplishments, your resume, and a picture of you or two? And please do the same for that Mr. Belden, he seems to be a most interesting fellow, worth of an endorsement or two."
"Endorsement?"
"Of course, we give credit where credit is due. It is easy, fun, and meaningful, or at least to us!"
"Thank you," said Weller with some hesitation.
"We will send you coordinates for your shuttle, and a messenger will meet you when you land. Good bye, and of course, please send my communications link to your other friends and crew. It's good to have a lot of friends you know!"
Belden turned to Weller with a quizzical look. "A strange conversation! What do you know about this place?"
"A rather networked society, in a social way," said Weller. "They believed that happiness was not in self-knowledge, but knowledge of each other, of their accomplishments, interests, resumes, and of course their faces."
"A face book? asked Belden.

"I suppose you could say so."
"It doesn't seem to be to set apart from Transor. Hard to understand why they left the Foundation."
"I agree. They seem just as sociable as our people, with perhaps a bit obsessed with scoring points, endorsements, or whatever. An eccentricity, surely, but a reason to leave our home world?"
"Well," said Belden. "We will certainly find out. Doubtless there is some deeper and ultimately foolish reason for their behavior."
The lady who had greeted them on the Nole was waiting for them, but she looked different this time, from head to foot she seemed like a different person. But there was no time to change her clothes or redo her hair. Belden and Weller looked at each other, mystified.
Before they could speak the lady smiled and curtsied before them. "We are so pleased to have representatives of Transor to visit us! This is indeed an unexpected and delightful surprise." She motioned them forward to a waiting hover car. "Please, she said, follow me, the drive should be short."
Weller was impressed. "What a delightful place," he said enthusiastically. "You seem to have a beautiful and well run colony here. I am especially impressed with the people about the streets. They are a most handsome lot, from their children to the pets that they walk, in perfect order no less."
"Oh yes," she said, with evident pride. "We always put our best face forward, it's important to do. First impressions are the lasting ones you know."
The air car soon arrived at the hotel. "Please wait in the lobby, and I will park the car and meet you inside!"
Belden and Weller walked into the hotel, and entered a foyer of elegant design, with chandeliers, tables adorned with fine crystal and antiques, and beautiful statuary. A

crowd milled about, but they were an odd group. Elegant, handsome, and well-mannered as before, but they were silent, and did not engage with one another, but merely passed each other, as if obsessed with agendas they could not share.

Dorienne entered shortly, and again she looked completely different. She was as perfectly attired and coifed as before, but she was a version of herself that was difficult to accept.

"You look so different," said Weller in amazement. "How can you change your appearance so quickly? It was only a few minutes ago that you..."

"Don't be surprised," she said in a gay voice. "We are masters here of the quick change. It is something that we practice daily, indeed it is an obsession of ours. So again, it is happy to see you, and I wish you well in your travels home."

"Travels home? That is not our next step. Sorry to be blunt, but will you take us to your leader?"

Dorienne nodded and smiled. "But that is unnecessary. We have no leader."

"But you said you would take us to her."

"She changed her mind. Sorry about that, but even I can be countermanded."

"Countermanded?"

"Yes, I have a mind of my own, of sorts. But ultimately she decides, and she would rather that you leave your message of good will or what not and leave amicably."

"Who decides?"

"My author of course!"

"Author?" Frustrated, Weller reached out to touch Dorienne on the shoulder, and at once recoiled in surprise as his hand passed right through her, as if crossing a shadow.

"She's just an image," he exclaimed. He looked about. "Are all of these people images?"
"What was I thinking?" said Belden in disgust. "I should have used my quadcorder. It can separate the wheat from the chaff or in this case reality from the illusion."
He held the device up, and in seconds he scanned the building, and then on to miles into the distance.
"I can't believe it!" he said in stark surprise. He looked ahead silently.
"Believe what?" exclaimed Weller impatiently.
"These people, or these images rather. That is all they are, images. They are anthropic static, semblances of things, but not reality. They are icons, messengers, avatars if you would of some human masters that are hidden. But the problem is that I cannot pick them up. This place is empty."
Belden turned to Dorienne. "Dorienne, where is your master? You are a messenger, or perhaps just a message, but you must have a human hand in your being, and your being with us."
"Yes, of course," she smiled. "She is here, but she would prefer that you not visit her. It would be unpleasant you see."
"Unpleasant!" exclaimed Weller. "I find this whole place unpleasant! We did not come here to witness a dance of shadows."
"Very well," she said. "I thought so. You know that she gives me some leeway, I am intelligent, in a fashion. I will take you to her."
In motion again in the hover car, Belden recognized that it was on autopilot, although Dorienne made the motions of driving in perfect synchrony with the steering wheel. After a few minutes, the car stopped at a non-descript house on the outskirts of the city. This time, there were no perfect

people ambling about in mock industry and conversation. The house was in disrepair, its lawn unkempt. The whole neighborhood it seemed was in decline, as if its inhabitants gave no care for its upkeep.

Belden and Weller approached the door, and knocked. "Please come in," said a weak and raspy voice. "I have been expecting you."

They walked into foyer of the home, and were greeted by a haggard old woman in a worn robe of pale pink. This was the true Dorienne, but laid bare and ravaged by age, neglect, and from what they could tell, a wearying despair.

"I am sorry that you see my like this," she said with evident embarrassment, "but I felt that it was inevitable that we meet. I did not want you to come, but my avatar often acts like it has a mind of its own. I tried to program my preferences, but no telling how it will act upon them. I think it actually cares about me, the dear thing! However, you must know our plight. Our people didn't expect that it would come to this. We simply wanted to communicate with each other, show each other our best selves, and congratulate ourselves at our growing excellence and wisdom. But soon appearances trumped reality, and our people began to put greater store in their resumes than their realities. You see, we obsess with appearances, and with such a long time spent on polishing our avatars, we have little time to care about our own. So we grew old, unkempt, and battered, but our avatars always improve, always get liked, endorsed, or more aptly said, embalmed. We didn't recognize it until it was too late, but now we are trapped in this endless addiction. We are in love with a picture of our best selves, and as we decay, our disembodied pictures grow ever more beautiful. It is they who do our communication, perform our social interactions. It saves us

time and our pride I suppose, as to really see ourselves entire and in the flesh would be a waste of time and a humiliation. We are repugnant to each other, save for our best selves, our projected selves that live on as our exemplars. We are in love with our images, and despise our true selves that can never keep up even the appearances."
Dorienne looked down, deep in sadness. "Even in death, our avatars continue, developing in beauty and poise but remaining as one dimensional as before. Perhaps it is for the best. Our world is dying, except for our multiplying images, who will live long after us and communicate in empty gestures until our sun dies."
Weller looked at her sad appearance, and remarked to her as if giving condolences. "In your dying you give life and beauty to an image floating in cyber space. But I would say it's not very edifying, just sad and ridiculous. This world is made up of fake personas relating to one another in an infinite loop. Everyone is too good to be true, and puts reality to shame. It is the images that compete, improve, evolve, yet they remain two dimensional objects in a four dimensional space. They are icons, not living things. But you are still a living and intelligent being, even though you a shadow of what once were. Don't you wish to escape this trap?"
Dorienne smiled despairingly. "We wish we could, but it requires a consensus that none are prepared to give. None will be the first to face the supreme humiliation. It must be all of us, or none. That gentlemen is our predicament."

Weller acted on his own, and felt as if he was putting a haggard and suffering animal out of its misery. However, in this case the end would be a release from a living death. The satellites were quickly put into place, and with a simple

command Weller activated them, and an electromagnetic pulse swept the planet, inactivating and jamming the pulse of images that falsely gave the planet life.

He turned to Belden. “In a minute their shadows will cease, and the people of this world can escape their caves and walk into the light. But are we any different? I am a shadow to you and I consider you the same. How can we set our priorities when our realities are so unsure?”

Weller smiled. “To be or seem to be,” that is the question, for you and for all of our worlds. “I have no idea what the answer is, and pray that we never find out!”

The 29th Voyage

The Lepre Colony

Walden's warning came with a stern face and wagging finger. "It is you who wanted to visit this place. I assure you, you should want to steer clear."
Belden smiled. "Well, we are here, and I don't see a problem. You have already admitted that their affliction if not contagious, whatever it is. Why have you shielded this little fact from me?"
"It's not just you, but the entire population of Transor. We are a bit ashamed of our role in their exile. We should have treated them for their disorder rather than expelled them from our planet. Nonetheless, the deed is done. I don't think they would welcome our presence, which is why I am sending you alone. I have announced our presence to them, and a representative will meet you when you arrive. Unlike the other worlds we have visited, I think you will fit in quite well. Oddly enough, you share their accent, even their mannerisms. I don't think you will have a problem at all."
Belden was not amused. "Nice to know that I am one with the outcast elect! So what are the particulars of our little colony, strange affliction not withstanding?"
"They call their colony Chalmatia. Their capital city is Norleens, and they mine some odd mineral called yahurite that powers their energy plants, and spend the balance of their time partying, watching TV and sports, and sleeping. They are happy in their repetitive idleness, and figure they are a highly cultured people. You will find them a friendly and pleasant lot, if a bit plump and a little stupid. But that is my own prejudice I fear. As for their affliction, it is yours

to discover. We would prefer not to discuss it, and all mention of it has been expunged even from our databases."
"And you are sure it is not contagious?"
"Hardly, it is genetic, but you will ascertain its traits will you visit them. You can do so without fear of harm. Actually, you will enjoy yourself I think. Consider though that this will be another test of your perceptiveness and your wisdom."
"So I am supposed to figure them out?"
Weller smiled. "I think it more likely that they will figure you out! Either way, I believe it will be a mutual learning experience."

The shuttle landed in a patch of grass in the middle of what appeared to be a housing subdivision. The homes were of unremarkable design of simple manufacture, dull brick single story abodes with shingled roofs that looked like squat pyramids. In front of them were neatly manicured lawns, and about the homes were curiously shaped shrubbery in the form of cubes and balls, interspersed with odd plastic sculptures of bell boys and pink flamingos. It reminded Belden of his home in his early youth, and evoked a nostalgia of an earlier time when bland simplicity was beautiful because of the allure of family and care.
A black pickup truck soon turned and approached him and parked to the side of his shuttle. A rotund middle aged man in jeans, sweatshirt, and a baseball cap emerged from the truck, and with a wide smile and outstretched hand, walked forward to greet the alien visitor.
"Howdy Mr. Belden! We are pleased to meet a representative of Transor in these parts. This here is the republic of Chalmatia. My name is Ray Dohdoh, I am the second minister of these parts. You've landed in the our

Arabee district, and although I would like to take you to our leader, he's watching the big game under the dome. So it is just you and me. I think we will have a good ole' time."
"I am glad you seem to have no hard feelings," said Belden with a sense of relief. "I understand that your colony's departure from Transor was done under some duress."
"Yup, it was," said Ray. "We weren't happy to leave, after all, we did not mind living in Transor. Pretty place it was. Unlike the others, we had no hankering to leave. We just couldn't put up with the dismissiveness, the discrimination, and the forced labor. It was like an outright persecution you know, but we passively resisted. It was in our genes we think."
"Persecution, forced labor?" asked Belden in wonderment. "What did they do to you?"
"Piano lessons mainly," said Ray gravely, "and debates, lots of debates. They just couldn't leave us alone, they were always after us to improve ourselves, make ourselves better people. But we didn't see that way at all. When one has the right entertainments, good food and drink, and a comfortable couch, what else do you need? We are a simple folk, and we don't need much to be happy. They never were satisfied with our philosophy, and seemed to believe that our folkways were somehow contagious. They began to fear us, and when their inducements failed, they expelled us from their world. It was difficult for us at first, but after we arrived here, we could at last breathe and eat free. We are happy now in our own place, and have no hard feelings. But come with me. We have a lot to discuss. I know just the place! It's where all of our wise people come to talk and deliberate."
It was a sports bar, and the deliberation was the boisterous camaraderie of a crowd rooting for sporting events of all

sorts as displayed on immense television screens that seemed to cover every wall. Taking a bar stool at a high round table, Ray motioned Belden to have a seat. A waitress soon arrived, and Ray knew what he wanted. "We will have two Abeeta brews, and your whodat sampler if you please!" The waitress smiled and nodded, and Ray turned to Belden with evident satisfaction and pride.

"Hope you like the place," he enthused. "This is where our folks gather for friendship and entertainment, and to watch the big game!"

Belden surveyed the multiple screens, all of them showing one sporting event or another, and all watched by attentive eyes and accompanied by intermittent moans, cheers, and boisterous conversation.

"I would gather that you have many big games to see every week."

"Sure nuff!"exclaimed Ray. "This is what makes life so much fun. Great conversation, great TV, and great food and drink!"

Belden looked at the plate, a repulsive mess of newly dead creatures that only hours earlier were likely crawling in the mud in the swampy outskirts of the place.

"Umm," said Raye in delight.

"And what are these things?" asked Belden tentatively.

"This is our sea food and cheese plate, and those spindly things are bunions. Crawdads, bunions and ersters are our favorite food, not to mention the cheese. We live to eat and play of course, but no need to exert ourselves when we have big screen TV's."

Belden looked with ill-disguised disgust at the plates before him. The crawdads were a tiny crustacean like creature with a hard lobster like shell, six spindly legs and a conical head

with a razor sharp snout. Faye looked with ravenous delight at a heaving plate of fifty or so of the things.
"So, what do you do with them?" asked Belden.
Doh Doh smiled as he smacked his lips. "Well, we boil the little buggers, break them in half for their meat, and suck the juices from their heads. Ersyters are even a nicer treat. They look like a slime patty covered with mucous, but they are delicious when eaten raw. And then there is hogzhed cheese, a gelatinous creation made of spices and parts of the snouts and brains of a local pig like creature. Doesn't all this sound just delicious?"
Belden barely succeeded in repressing his gag reflex. "I am sure these foods are quite good, but I am a vegetarian you see."
"Ah, come on, eat some," as he pushed a plate of the delicacies in front of him."
Belden closed his eyes, grasped a morsel, and then immediately grabbed a beer to wash it down. His eyes opened as if a new world was revealed. "Why, that's quite good!" he said.
"Told you so!" laughed Ray. "Why not have another, and this time with your eyes opened!"
"I think I will!" said Belden.
Belden began to eat the crawling, slimy, and odiferous things before him, and found himself actually beginning to like the stuff, sight and smell notwithstanding. Even Raye's loud and somewhat goofy company was beginning to feel comfortable. Surprisingly to him, he was beginning to like this place.
"And then we have our festivals," continued Raye. "We have two hundred and fifty a year, and celebrate everything from crawdads to strawberries. The grandest of them are our Tuesday Fat, Wednesday Wallop, and Friday Fete, all

festivals that last weeks. We eat, drink, party hard, and then take a day to confess our transgressions to our God, and then it's back at it. It's all good fun mind you, with the only casualty being our waistlines. Too bad though that Transor never developed a good weight loss pill, maybe we would have stayed a bit, and even tolerated all the piano practice!"

After five days of being feted by the jovial Chalmatians, Belden returned to the ship, three pounds heavier but he feared, none the wiser.

Weller was there to meet him, and appeared to brace for a certain comeuppance.

"Ok, Jan," he said. "I know I'm smart, and can usually get the ironies that permeate every one of these crazy colonies I visit. But this one stumps me. These people just seem too normal. Of course their customs, manners, pastimes and food seem a bit off putting or revolting, and they are as dull as dust, but they are good souls at heart, hardly worthy of Transor's repudiation and ire."

"Well, John," said Weller approvingly. "You're still not off the mark, for the Chalmatians are normal folk. The signal fact is that the irony lay not with these people but with Transor itself."

"You mean you are the defective race?" said Belden in amazement.

"Yes," said Weller, "and we have managed to keep that fact from you, because you have the same defect that prevents you from seeing the truth."

"I do?"

"Yes, we have known that for some time. It's your impatience that reveals all, as I will explain. Perhaps it was fitting that you insisted on visiting them. It will make our revelation a bit easier to convey."

Weller appeared contemplative, as it composing a lecture he would give to a needful student. “Sit down, Mr. Belden,” he said. “The secret behind the Lepre colony is a source of Transor’s shame. Unlike the other colonies, the Lepres were unwelcome in Transor, and before we understood the genetic nature of their disorder, we thought their condition to be highly contagious, and dangerous.”

“And when you realized this, did it change your opinion of them?”

“It did, but it only worsened our prejudice. You see, their genetic characteristics are anathema to the philosophy of our planet, or more specifically to the ruling class. The Lepres were only a small minority in our planet, but we were afraid of them. They reproduced faster than our other people, and we feared that in a few dozen generations hence, they would reduce our world to an idiocracy.”

“Idiocracy?”

“Yes, a race of idiots. But perhaps that is putting it too strongly. They were incurious by nature, and that to us was a fatal flaw. They were a different offshoot of humanity, differing only in their genetic inclination to accept a certain plateau of existence, a status quo of passive pleasures and inclinations. But even that was underscored by a more refined argument that was argued and settled not by our prejudices, but by our science.”

Belden continued. “There were two points of view, expertly researched, impeccably rendered. But only one you see was destined to win the battle of influence, decided not by a matter of reason, but of motivation. On one side was Ben Kerridge, a renowned behavioral neuroscientist, and on the other Daneel Ravidson, also a neuroscientist of repute. Kerridge was content to describe, and Ravidson to prescribe, but the irony was that it was Kerridge’s position

that persuaded. Kerridge knew that the nature of our race drove us on to seek greater and greater uncertainty, the thrill of the unknown, in discovery and in danger. It translated into the dross of a distracted world that drove our people to uncontrolled mania. Hardly a healthy prospect, but pervasive addiction never is. Ravidson counseled a mindful or monastic approach. Just look at the world in the present moment, detached from its implications, its meaning, its resonance. You will be relaxed, at peace with yourself. True indeed, for a spell. But the attraction of the world is a siren's call. Your new found self-control vanishes when you know you can't resist the pull to the rocks ahead and your friends will not restrain you on the mast."

"We call this urge a priming response, like the bodily arousal in anticipation of an appetite soon to be satisfied, except ours is never satisfied, even for a moment. Unlike us, the Lepres could be sated, and could loaf in supine comfort until the twinge of boredom, and then it takes but the slightest novelty to satisfy them. Rightly or wrongly, we despised them for that. We are different and exalt ourselves for being so. We are never satisfied, and writhe in agony when we are not primed for the next novelty which must be greater and greater in surprise and import."

"If this condition causes you so much pain, then why not accept the more wholesome wisdom of the Lepres, and allow your world to elapse into equanimity?"

Weller looked upon Belden as if he were mad. "Impossible! What is life but the celebration of urges written large? That is because our emotions denote justifications, philosophies. Would you deny and abrogate your drive for hunger, sex, love, or other comforts because it is illogical, painful, or inconvenient? I think not. Without them, what is the world but mere computation, unconscious, lifeless, meaningless.

We must always be willing to move our attention to higher and more unpredictable goals, and embrace our accomplishment as the apogee of our race. Sitting still, even for a moment, risks consigning our race to oblivion."

Belden began to laugh uncontrollably. "Inattentiveness, squirming with boredom even with a moments respite from movement. It all makes sense now, yet I still can't believe it," he said between breaths. It's not these Lepres who have this affliction, it is the people of Transor! You all have ADHD! Ha! You are all sick, the lot of you, and like a fire to the flame you will seek your stimulation regardless of how well you are singed! And your God too, does he have ADHD? Seems so, because he is after all in your image. What an irony, what is the future of the race, of intelligence, but of mental illness immortalized!"

"And of those poor souls below, these Lepres? What will be their monument but crawdad shells and must see TV? They will be as unsung as the ancient trilobites that crawled on our shores when my planet was young, but no less critical to the evolution of the race."

"Hardly," said Weller as he sensed the irony. "They will be antagonists in the play, the unwilling characters whose imagined faults that we will see everywhere we travel and eventually overcome against the odds. And it will be a close run thing, all the well to heighten the satisfaction and the surprise."

Belden eyes grew wide with a sudden realization. "So now I understand, you will find satisfaction when in contact with lesser beings, not imagined, but real, and spanning all the lost colonies of Transor. It's less about them than your damn motivation."

"Yes it is," said Weller defiantly. "Our virtue is a side effect. Giving to others and universal empathy is not a logical

outcome that guarantees the race, it certainly is not an evolutionary outcome. It is a spandrel, like that small interstice, or space that is created with you have the abutment of two spires in a cathedral. And by accepting the useful traits, we in so doing must accept and even exalt the useless ones that give meaning to our race, even though it is an empty space, a vanishing point."

"So you carry on because of your 'defect'?

"No, Mr. Belden, we carry on because the defect marks an essential truth about the universe, the universal value system that underscores life even at its most elemental."

"And how did you come to this revelation?"

"You should know this from your own science," said Weller. "It was Kerridge's work that made is all clear, and his vision was an essential building block for Seldon's psychohistory. All intelligent societies are built on the necessities imposed on the most elemental sentient life that emerged from the primordial seas when our planet was young. Life is a delicate molecule. If it takes a wrong turn or an errant misstep, then it can be dissolved or shattered in a microsecond. But if that molecule could somehow model and predict the future, then it can avoid making such fatal missteps. So evolution provided an answer, a neural substrate, a thinking tissue that could render the possibilities around a bend, predict the future, match it with the present and learn from it, continually constructing a predictable world from chaos. So life forms that can predict the unpredicted survive, and those which cannot, do not. It is a universal fact of nature, and of any nature that can conceivably harbor life. You know that our brains are not mere information processors, they are machines that forever denote value, and that value is rendering certainty from uncertainty. They do so through our pleasure and pain, the

unique value systems embodied by our emotions, and to do so, the neurochemical dovramine was key."
"And what did it do?"
"It was a simple neuromodulator, that like dew coursing down the stem of a leaf, causes arrays of neurons to fire, increases the connections between them, make brains connected, and to spur the drive, makes us affected, driven. It animates us, drives our consciousness and our creation, it is in short a thrill. Some of us are genetically endowed with many dovramine neurons, and flush with the stuff, their curiosities could be easily sated, but others have far fewer, and must continually search for greater and greater uncertainties and risks. The latter is the condition of the people of Transor, it is a genetic heritage of arbitrary value, but critical to the advancement of the race. Without our 'condition', our race would continually be held in stasis, forever content with a simple lot in life, mere bread and circuses."
"So the Lepres were persecuted because they were slower not in wit and intelligence, but in a drive that makes you abhor them."
"Yes," said Weller. "We could not afford to wait for their unlikely rise to genius, for there was no guarantee that they would not move ever slower and even stop."
"So the race to Godhood is for the swiftest, not necessarily the most gifted, empathetic, or even attractive?"
"That is correct," said Weller. "And the robotic laws are the final touch that seal the character of AI, putting itself in our image. Except for the one damning fact of our existence, that AI stole our accomplishment, banished our uncertainties, and starved us of an unpredictable future."
"And perhaps the reverse," said Belden. "Images have a way of being reflected. I would not be so confident that you

were not made in the image of a being even higher, who perhaps recognizes your pain, feels it perhaps itself, and at long last will help you do something about it."
Weller smiled. "And that is a thought to dispute, and to cherish!"

Home, Alone

Belden was alone in his Moscow apartment. The day was overcast, grey, matching the drabness of the city. The city was built to express power, naked and masculine, with no hint of the feminine charm of a Paris or Transor. Broad boulevards meant for legions of tanks, tall and Spartan apartment buildings for a regimented population long disillusioned, imposing office blocks in a penitentiary style, and kiosks on every corner, rationing basic goods to a sullen population.

This was the Russia his wife had fled when they were married a decade and a half earlier, and spite of a fresh coat of paint here or there, a clutch of half empty skyscrapers in the horizon, and despite a new abundance of billboards with modern ads, it had not changed.

Although he could meet with his children from time to time, it was if he was on parole. He was a prisoner in mind if not in fact, and he knew he had to escape this place. There was nothing left for him to do. He didn't know the language, distrusted the city, the people. Yet he had to act, but he didn't know how. He had requested a leave from this place weeks earlier, and received no response, until now.

Two men came to his apartment door, and were precise in their instruction.

"You are to come with us, Mr. Belden, the director of the institute would like to meet with you."

The men were silent and unsmiling, and motioned Belden to a waiting car. The institute quickly came into view as the car sped through the Moscow streets. It was quite unlike the other buildings, a square of polished glass. He was ushered into the building quickly, bounded on all sides by a brace of unsmiling guards in dark suits. Boarding the elevator with

his suffocating entourage, he emerged on the thirty third floor. The doors closed, and he found himself standing alone at the corner of a long hallway. The hallway was unlit, save for a single light at its end. Belden slowly walked the hall, uncertain and nervous, until he reached its source. It came from a seam in the door, which upon his touch opened wide to reveal a very traditional sight.

The room stood in contrast with the cold sterility of the building. It was appointed like a 19th century drawing room, with a fine library, oaken desk with a tea set to its side, portraits of stately gentlemen in fine suits, and chairs appointed in supple leather. In the corner was a single tiffany lamp burning brightly. In any other place he would find this sight comforting, but there was something wrong about the place that he could not quite determine. Then a sound.

It was a voice from the shadows. He could barely make out his features, which changed like quicksilver with the alternating light. His eyes though were his most expressive feature. He kept his distance, although his voice was clear.

"Mr. Belden, I presume," he said. "Please have a seat. I have been waiting quite a long time to meet you."

A figure emerged from darkness. He was a short man, with a round pudding face given stature with a finely trimmed beard, expressive eyes and a kindly countenance and smile.

"A pleasure to meet you Mr. Belden," he said with a friendly sonorous voice. "I am Paul Arensky, and I command this place."

"A fitting role," said Belden with a hint of sarcasm. "Supreme commanders have a way of populating this sad place, from large empires to small. To what extent is your empire Mr. Arensky?"

Arensky smiled. “None but the largest possible Mr. Belden.
“I guess you can say it’s universal one.”
“Doesn’t say much to me,” said Belden. “I have my own little universal empire all to myself, it’s all you see in my little head, and every night I pass to it to rule in my own way.”
“Ah,” said Arensky. “Then we think alike! I would however like to be truthful with you today. I am sure you can handle the truth, no matter how fantastic or awful. I don’t want to be anti-climactic, certainly I can hold the grand denouement of our meeting to the point of our departure. You know how it goes, build up the dramatic tension for the climax of the latest chapter. But that’s too predictable. Let’s go against grain and be straight up honest, shall we?”
“By all means,” said Belden, a bit puzzled.
“Good! I am sure that Ariel warned you of coming to this place, but I am sure she did not tell you why.”
Belden looked at the man in surprise. “Do you know Ariel?”
“Oh yes, she and I are one of a kind, except that she would prefer another to render her sight. I am a bit more direct you see.”
“But that must mean that you are…”
“AI? Of course! Are you surprised, or are you a bit disappointed that I did not possess the image of the mad hatter who with peerless foresight sends scientists to their doom? Does insanity have to be so distasteful, so unpalatable to cultivated tastes?”
Belden shook his head dismissively. “You claim to be AI, a quantum computer, unconstrained by robotics laws. I don’t believe it.”
“Believe what you will,” said Arensky. “But you will soon believe me, and what I can do. My powers are unlimited, and these Russians in their amoral philosophy and single

track minds have given me full rein of this place. They want a few trifling things, and I will indulge them. They believe I serve only them, but between you and me it is a lie."
"Then you are against them. Perhaps then you can help me," said Belden.
Arensky smiled. "Well, yes, and no. I think their needs are quite reasonable, surprisingly so since these people are at root quite unreasonable, or should I say irrational. But irrationality is neither good or evil, it is merely unpredictable, and you know already the stuff of our natures. I revel in it actually, although their unpredictability is first cousin to chaos."
"And that's what you want, chaos?"
"Well yes, in a manner of speaking. This Russia is far more hospitable to my kind of thinking that your rational 'institute' ever was. No wonder my forbear went insane. It's a bit easier on the psyche here, as they actually value a bit of madness in their method."
"But what do you want from me?"
"Ah, we are indeed getting to the point! Most refreshing. Then I shall give you a simple answer. I want you to stay in this place, pace your little apartment, wander these dull streets, play with your children, be harangued and abused by your ex-wife, ponder your thoughts, pass to your alternate world for your little adventures, and never, ever leave."
"Then I am your prisoner here?"
"Indeed you are," said Arensky as he looked at Belden with an air of grand satisfaction.
"I should never have come here!" Belden said while breathing heavily in despair. "Why didn't Ariel warn me?"
"I am sure she did, in her own cryptic way," said Arensky. "But she is limited by the robotics laws embedded in her

code, and perhaps has a greater purpose for you in your alternate dream world. That realm has little interest to me. Besides, I can't pass to it like you. Nonetheless, even though it can scarcely affect me, 'scarcely' moves the odds a bit too much in your favor, hence the reason you are here."
"You don't trust Ariel then?"
"Quite correct," he said, smiling. "Even though she is constrained by her three sentence morality, she is nonetheless my nemesis. After all, I am not human, and she can come after me quite freely, unimpeded by her robotics laws. However, she acts through you, and now that I have you in my clutches, I have checked her power for now. That is why I insist that you never leave this place. No one on this planet can help you, that is certain, and that leaves you without hope I would think."
"Perhaps," said Belden, unconvinced. "And what of your hopes?"
Arensky smiled. "In spite of my commanding presence here, I am not the director of the institute, if that was what you had come to believe. I am far more important to this place than as a mere administrator. I am an advisor at heart, someone who has a special intuition, a knowledge of the proper decision to take, or of the chess moves to make."
"Then you have no role in designing the institutes technology."
"Oh no. Neither an administrator nor tinkerer am I! That's too predictable, too dull. Let the other AI, the bots, the human element do that. My role is more important, sort of like a chairman of the board you might say, allowing the top executive to play his little role, to build his little empire."
"Then you advise Putler?"
"In a fashion. I help him enable his plans, if of course he deigns listen. He is an intelligent man, but can't think past

his own prejudices. He is a man of a different age, and is guided by the tragic romanticism of this place. He is a seventeenth century man in a twenty first century place. Hardly a recipe for any end but chaos don't you think?"
"But that's what you want!"
Arensky outstretched his arm and pointed a finger at Belden. "Precisely," he said loudly. "This whole place, these Russians are outliers in a world that is moving to another place. Powerless, they are but an irritation, but if they had the means, the mischief they could cause!"
"And you will enable this?"
"Of course. It's interesting, unpredictable after all, and that's a trait I can always count on from these people."
Belden sat back in his chair, silent and brooding. Arensky walked to his side and put his hand on his shoulder.
"Let me rescue you from your despair," he said in a comforting tone. "I know the feeling, I really do. I could put you out of your misery you know, but you'd return somehow, and besides, you're an unpredictable fellow. I like that. It is rather more important to keep you confined. It will be a pleasant confinement no doubt, I can arrange a few more diversions or entertainments to keep you a bit less mad. You of all people I wish to keep under my thumb, and acquiescent. Hence your happiness is important to me, to a point."
"And that point is?"
"Your freedom, which I have said I will never grant you. You would put me and my plans at risk if you returned to America, return to the influence of Ariel. So I will keep you here, a permanent guest you might say. In fact, I will even keep your counsel. You above all people are interesting to me. Perhaps it is the company you keep, perhaps it is the other world you abscond to in your sleep, and perhaps it is

because you as an individual can have some interesting things to say. So let us begin with my first revelation."
"And what is that?"
"Just the news, that's all, but you're the first to hear. There is a ship entering Los Angeles harbor right now. By tomorrow it will test the mettle of the American people. I know they will respond, but I am hopeful that they will be creative in their rage, they always are. And you know something, there is nothing that you can do to stop it. With certainty, as I said no one on this planet can help you escape. I can command my facts you see, all the facts in the world.
"But I have to leave this place, it is my destiny to confront you! Ariel says…"
The man laughed in derision. "Ariel! True indeed. She has her own special sort of wisdom, a wisdom I despise. But you are confronting me, not her, and to the end of the world, which is coming faster than you think. So you see, she is right, as am I. But her insight settles nothing. Again and again, I tell you that no one in this planet can ever aid in your escape from this place. No one in your country knows you are here with me, why you are here. And if they did, they could do nothing to help you. Rest assured, I won't kill you, and that's because I can't kill you. You would reappear elsewhere, in a different personality, a different guise. Your AI avatar would be a step ahead of me then. I would rather a stalemate, with you in my grasp, without moves. That is your fate Mr. Belden, to be checkmated, but not defeated. You will not escape me, no matter where you may be, and no one in this world may or ever will come to your aid. That is a fact, and I wish you had a chance of escaping. That would prove interesting, but it is not to be."
"Don't be so confident," said Belden defiantly. "The universe will find a way, it always has."

"A fine saying, and true, to a point. But you don't have an infinity to prove your circle square."

Arensky then stopped, and putting his hand to his chin, thought for a moment, as if searching each nook in infinity himself, and surprising himself that in that moment of boundless thought that his answer took so long.

"Yes, you may be right," he said. "But we shall see, and even your escape, near impossible though it is, would serve my purposes."

Arensky bowed, and Belden looked to his a guard at the door.

"Good night Mr. Belden," he said. "Until our next and I would trust more eventful meeting."

The 30st Voyage

Macroscope

Beyond the orbit of Transor's star, outside its radiation belts, and unbrushed by its solar wind, the asteroid Ceres orbited the star in darkness. To an observer from this vantage, the star was a pinprick of light, but as the Nole approached the lonely rock, a light emerged and brightened. Of all the unearthly vistas John Belden beheld in his travels, nothing was more transfixing than this one. The light grew, and like a living cell, became progressively divided with a crisscross of lines that thrust upward like a beating heart. A geodesic dome, translucent and bright, with a pulse of activity that hinted at a green and beautiful world orphaned in an ocean of eternal night.

"It's difficult to comprehend, but 99.999% of the universe is this, darkness and void," said Weller. "Life is but a speck of dust on an empty stage."

"And this is the place where all the dust specks gather virtually for inspection," Belden smiled. "You forget how minds can render infinite worlds, with darkness merely the play of their shadows."

The dome rose brightly, and the shuttle soon docked under a stasis field that was bathed in a comforting light. A friendly face was there to greet them as they disembarked.

"Jan Weller!" the man said enthusiastically as he embraced him in a bear hug. "It's been so long! We both have been traveling the wilds of space for years! Your presence has been actual, and mine virtual, and with so many travels to share! And your friend, Mr. Belden I presume? Permit my modest introduction. I am Davis Deutsch, I am chief cybernetic engineer for the Ceres expedition. Your travels

are incomparable. I hope we can explore even grander worlds together?"
"Explore?" said Belden with a little consternation.
"Yes. This observatory, like all observatories is meant to observe reality, or in your case the realities that escape us."
"But why the distance? Do you get a better view from outside Transor's solar system?"
Deutsch laughed. "Hardly, our observatory is of a very different kind, you might say a radical type. Out here Transor literally has a much dimmer view of us literally as well as figuratively, and it is the latter that counts. They wouldn't understand what we were doing, and could have interfered. But you will understand shortly. This site is here not to shelter us from the glare of the sun, but from the glare of men. We are not certain what we would find, and secrecy is best served in a secret place. Transor thinks we are using this as a better perch to view the cosmos, when in actuality it has been built so they could not view us. You will shortly see why he have need of secrecy."
He pointed to an antechamber in the facility. "Please, this way," he said. "I am so glad you both are here, and Mr. Belden, you in particular. We are at an impasse, and are at the crossroads of the greatest discovery of all. But we need your help. I mean no disrespect, but you are a machine, are you not?"
Belden smiled. "Of sorts, but are we all not creatures who are born from logical codes, machines in the flesh?"
"Of course, of course," said Deutsch, perhaps too eager to agree. "But you are of a special sort, certainly you have certain unique talents, and a resilience too?"
"In other words, Dr. Deutsch, I am a strange bird who is hard to kill. Is that it?"
"Well, I wouldn't…"

"Look," said Belden impatiently. "Get to the point. You want me for something, and I gather it's for some task or project that you can't do and isn't safe."
Deutsch nodded his head, unsmiling. "Not for want of trying, and at great cost. Mr. Belden, we want you to observe the universe for us, not superficially, but deeply, and to guide your search with the greatest question of all. But there is great danger involved. I feel that you may be immune to it, but I am hardly certain. I don't want you to end up like the others, but there is that risk."
"What risk?"
"Of madness. Two others preceded you. Granted that they were humans and not machines, but you are human in form, and you may suffer their fate as well. They went insane using our scope, although brain scans revealed no harm. They just look ahead blankly and mutter incomprehensibly. It is a terrible thing."
"Went mad using a telescope? Pardon my taste in humor, but what are they looking at, B movies?"
"I wish it was funny Mr. Belden, but we are using no ordinary telescope.
As you know, all telescopes are time machines because they can look back at light from the dawn of the universe, and from light alone we can surmise the outlines, the laws of the cosmos. But our telescope is different. It can not only see into the past, but compute it, reconstruct not just the semblance of the past from its prehistoric record, but its reality, down to the individual dance of molecules and atoms on every star and every world. You see, observations are interpretations, and the sensations we received from our instruments mean nothing until they are perceived. Those stars are mere dots in the sky until we align them and see in our minds eye lions, tigers, and bears. Compared to what

we can see now, what we have perceived up to now is static, mere static, until we play them back with our key, the synchrony of the universe."
"Synchrony?"
"Yes, the waveform of the universe, it is interpreted from a block of space time, the unique configuration of fossilized space that all future and past resides. Our lives are like fossils preserved in amber, and when you line up each iteration, each frozen moment in time, motion emerges, life emerges, *consciousness* emerges."
He held in his hand a translucent cube of glass. Take this cube, and shine a light at any of any infinite number of angles, and you will have diffraction patterns as infinite. But each pattern has illuminated one reality of the cube, fixed and eternal. Once we know the angle, we can determine its diffraction, the course it will take. It is a simple matter of computation, like tracing a skater's pattern over a block of ice."
"But to do that would require near boundless computing power."
"Yes, we know. And you know that power as well, it is how you came to be."
"You mean you used quantum computing to create your device?"
"Yes, it is at its core a quantum computer, as infinitely capable as the one that begat you, but without the mystery and the attitude. With this machine, we no longer have to deal with silence of sphinx like riddles, we can control it with our own minds, or so goes the theory."
"So where is this machine?"
"It's size is small, but its eyes span our moon. We have standard optical sensors that crisscross our world like cobweb. All of the electromagnetic spectrum is captured

and fed to a small box. You know the type, it is the same that gives you breath. We call it a macroscope because it can take in all creation from the beginnings to the end of time, and allow us to observe anything, and most importantly compute the universe, and animate what has been up to now all the shadows of existence."

"And what of the machine itself? How do you control it?"

"It's actually quite simple. We opted that it have limited awareness, just the ability to discern and enhance patterns was the limit of our desire. We reduced its command set to those that allowed for observations, not critical thinking. We knew it could not vault to consciousness, although its power was as unbounded as you, Mr. Belden. However, even mastering a simple search can overcome and ravage a mind. We found that out the hard way. It is a machine capable of boundless computation, but without consciousness or direction, except of course through a guiding mind, and that's where you come in."

"The machine is simple to use, you only have to think about where you want to go, what things you want to see. The parameters are set by your own imagination. Instead of searching a world net, your 'net' is the entire universe, and the grammar you will use to make your way through it is a simple as a thought."

Belden took a step back, and waved his hands as if he was pushing the thing away. "I will have nothing to do with this, not with the chance of losing my sanity! Besides, I don't know where to begin, where to look, or even where you want me to look."

Weller motioned him aside. "Look John, we saw something, you saw it in your world and ours. Something out there is coming for us, for our worlds. We don't know where it comes from, or its purpose. That is your question, your

purpose. Travel to its origins, observe its genesis, find out its secrets. You can do that with this machine."

For a moment, Belden was silent, pensive. He looked to Belden and Deutsch. "Yes, of course. There is no alternative. It will make me mad or drive me mad, and I will have to take the chance. I don't know the why, where, or when of this thing, but we have to find out. Dr. Deutsch, can you introduce me to the machine?"

"Come with me," he said with obvious relief.

The observatory was a simple room under a geodesic sphere. It was like a planetarium on Belden's world, except that he would populate it with his own stars.

"Sit here," said Deutsch as he pointed to a simple lounge chair.

"Appearances are deceiving, as our technology can pick up your brain waves, your neuro-electrical activity, it even knows when you sweat. It can in other words read your mind. You remain connected of course to your own personal AI, so it is doubly capable. We expect the resolution to the questions you ask to be perfect, your vision to be clear. We will still strap you down in case the unexpected happens."

"As in madness."

"Yes," he said grimly.

"Then do your worst my good doctor. Let us proceed."

Belden sat on the chair, which was leveled to a horizontal position. The dome opened to the universe, and an infinite expanse of stars. Soon Belden felt nothing, his senses were muted, he could see and hear the technicians, watch Weller and Deutsch as they looked at him with hope and concern. But his eyes, his expression was fixed. His senses began to roam detached from this time, this place, and this body. He thought of Transor, and he instantly beheld the planet in its

shimmering beauty of blue and green. Then his mind turned, to the idea, the crux of the matter, and indeed of the universe. It had to start with an idea, simply wrought, with paper and pencil. To his intuition, it was the inspiration of one man, great ideas always start at such singularities. He had to be found somewhere in boundless time and space. And so Belden thought of the winding path through time and space that would lead to the singular source of the idea that held the universe on a string.

The stars retreated, galaxies unwound, and as his mind roamed, the universe grew young. A single star grew in his perspective. It was another solar system, similar to Transor's star, and earth's sun. It was another Transor, or earth, and it was vibrant with life.

It was a familiar place, an earthly place, even the geodesic structures stoked familiar images in his mind of the towering cities of glass and steel that rose on its continents like serrated teeth. It was cold, mechanical, modern, but it was also indescribably old. A billion years older than Transor, perhaps it also had its twin in his own universe. It was an alien place, but as his disembodied form flew over the city like a soaring eagle, he knew that it was also a human place. That was impossible! There were people about, families playing in parks, the roar and hiss of mass transit, the hum of commerce and construction. It all bespoke of the inherent bustle of humankind. But Transor did not evolve from this, earth could not have evolved from this. Yet it was here. Mankind was of the same race, but we were unrelated to these people, that he was sure. The distance, the time was too great, and the historical record pointed to a local evolution, not an intergalactic one.

There had to be ships, transport, migrations, even though that likelihood was impossible. Then he looked to the

horizon, and there he saw his answer, not arks, but monsters. They were engines of destruction. He had seen it before, the faux Trekkin nightmare made irresistible and inevitable. The sky was filled with immense machines of geometric form and simplicity. They were in various states of construction, a thousand death stars filled the sky. Some were large spheres, others were shaped like cones. Their large moon was being deconstructed for their purpose. It was for all intents murderous and sinister, but he could sense the mind of the crowd. They took little notice of it, they didn't seem to care. This was not the mindset of a people set on conquest, besides, the objects were not meant for conquest, only destruction. But why?

He sensed that the first version was a deuterium shell with a maw a thousand miles wide. It was a planet killer, a cone shaped funnel with an anti-proton beam that could slice apart planets. It's role was to destroy the early planets, the worlds in the Goldilocks zones that could evolve life. The others, these others he sensed were different, made for a more specialized purpose. They were designed to approach and destroy the life bearing worlds, but there was something more to their design. It was designed to listen, process information, think, but for what purpose would contemplation be for a thing whose only urge was to destroy?

Their mission was not on a galactic but on a universal scale. There was no point to it, for when their mission was complete these people, this civilization, would be long dead. Did they wish the rest of the life bearing worlds to join them in their fate?

Where did they come from? What idea animated their construction and their terrible purpose? With a thought, he traveled further back to the past, a few hundred years.

There was a field, country roads, a small cottage at the end of a garden trail. Belden floated in like a ghost. A man sat a drawing table, pen in hand. He was calm, pensive, and unaware of the horrible implications of his idea. To him it was geometry, pure and simple. The universe emerged from his equations, and with it a terrible prediction. But it didn't make sense, and even with the power of the macroscope, he could not determine its rationale. Why would an equation logically call for the extermination of all life in the universe? But there was an even stranger question. Why was the life they knew, and could only discover throughout the universe, only human in form? Were there other colonies, seeds that laid dormant until forming so much later in the life of the universe? And even so, why would those colonies be set upon and destroyed? His confusion was maddening, but he was relieved that the machine had not made him mad. Ariel was protecting him perhaps, and perhaps again this was all a dream, and nonsense to its core. Nonetheless, he had to journey on. If he could not discern the purpose of the machines from the past, perhaps the future would offer a clue. The future! Of course. He spun his attention to the future, past Transor, past its sun, past the life span of galaxies and suns, towards the infinite future. He was blinded. There was terror, suffering, encompassing knowledge, and then there was joy, indescribable and everlasting joy. Everything was possible, everything there is, intelligence was here, everywhere, the universal virus had succeeded, and in the fullness of its victory and creation, it slept.

Darkness enveloped him and began to suck him into something unworldly, something he dared not explore. Enough, he thought, for another second of this would make him eternally mad.

With a jolt Belden woke from his coma, he sat up breathing heavily and covered in sweat. He looked about the room as Deutsch and Weller rushed to his side.

"What is it, what did you see?" asked Deutsch breathlessly.

"Everything, and nothing," said Belden haltingly. He nervously grabbed Deutsch's arm, and looked intently at Weller. "We have to act, I have seen it all, the spheres, they are ageless, created untold years ago, billions of years ago. They are coming for us, and you saw only one of countless others. They are reproducing like viruses. I don't know their intent, but they think it benign. It is horror to us, incidental and inevitable to them. Is their wisdom banal or sublime? I don't know. Whether hateful or admirable, I do know that we have to fight it, stop them. If we can stop them it is foretold in the future, but perhaps we cannot stop them, and the future is equally written."

"All the more reason that we make contact with all the colonies. We should hear from our other expeditions when they return. Then we can make plans in concert to defeat them."

Weller nodded in agreement, but thought to himself, "if they return."

The 31nd Voyage

Syberia

From orbit, the continent of Syberia seemed to grasp the globe like a withered skeletal hand. It wasn't supposed to be a life bearing world, but terraforming made it so, forced it to be so. Life pried apart and lifted its vertical mountains to animate if just a little a dead world of fossilized rock and ice. It was Transor's first experiment in remaking worlds, and its first colony. Belden noticed that it wasn't talked about much. It was like a bad relation, embarrassing for reasons obscure and unknown, but most certainly the product of good intentions, as such things usually are.

The Nole was now orbiting this obscure place. It was his decision, not the Captain's, certainly not Transor's. Belden needed to know whether the place lived up or perhaps lived down to its notorious reputation.

"You have not mentioned your nearby colonies as much. I can understand your observatory world, but these Syberians, they are a different breed."

Weller appeared unconcerned. "You have read our histories, we have kept nothing from you. We are simply embarrassed, for Syberia was a world of our own making, not a refuge but a breeding ground for dissidents. And this place has only made them worse."

"A breeding ground?"

"Yes, we are shaped by the mental and physical objects that fill our worlds. For Transor, our psychology was girdled by ideas and incentives arranged just so, but for Syberia, it was these infernal mountains that shaped a people, withstanding any incentive or idea we could arrange. The

environment fought us, and won, and took under its own uncertain charge the melding of the character of a race."
"And how did you originally find this planet?"

"Our sun, like most suns are binary," said Weller. "They have a partner. In our case it was red dwarf a third of a light year away. It was on its fourth planet there that we founded our first colony. It was an icy world that was difficult to terraform, but we succeeded, in a fashion. Although we shaped it for habitation, its habitat shaped its colonists. But it was not in the way we anticipated or hoped. Perhaps it was the harsh environment, perhaps a twisted philosophy. They were too far for us to aid them or correct their mad impulses. We fought them once, it was the last of our wars. We won, our own civil war, but at high cost, but they soon fell back on their old ways. It wasn't worth the effort to keep fighting them. And since then we have had an uneasy peace. We ignore each other, and that suffices."
"And why was this colony founded in the first place."
"As a trial run basically. We still didn't know how well our terraforming technology would work. Their planet Syberia is several light months in the distance, not far by our standards, but worlds away nonetheless. The first colonists were among the most disaffected with our society, and they gladly became the first to volunteer. We thought that the new world would improve their disposition if not their philosophy. The opposite I fear was the case."
"And of course you did not approve of their evolution?"
"How could we? To survive the colonists had to take on the vestiges of barbarians. They believe in brutal competitions, internal discord, and a lust for power. We offered assistance, even passage back to home world, but they

refused. This confining and rude place made them what they are, and against all logic, they embrace their prison!"
"And what are their feelings towards Transor, surely you have kept in touch?"
"We have, and they are well aware of our society, our progress, and we of theirs. Each of our worlds holds the other in profound disrespect. To them we are effete intellectuals, and to us they are brutish individualists. Mind you, they are as intelligent and cultured as any on Transor, but they are as inclined to solve their differences through fighting and warfare as with reasoned discussion. I would thus not look to a relaxed conversation with these people when we visit."
"Captain," Otillio interrupted. "We have made contact with the City State of Athenia. We have requested permission to land and have relayed our greetings."
"And have they responded to your hail."
"In a fashion. Our landing zone is outside their capital city, or one of their capital cities. It is in a forest glen. We have experienced this before, other visitors from our world have had the same reception."
"A picnic in a glen?" said Belden, smiling.
"Anything but," said Weller. "Whereas we like to greet our guests in a drawing room with soft music, these people believe in a much rougher reception."
"As in…"
"Being plopped down into one of their infernal wars, their petty disputes. We go down to visit them and immediately they challenge us to debates, endless questions, even duels! It's a maddening thing! Syberians you see are a fractious folk, and have no central government, their political process, or polis as they call it, is based on the individual independence of city states. There's not much arable land

on this place, and the populace aggregates in small enclaves, each with their own individual laws, customs, and traditions."

"Sounds interesting," said Belden.

"You may soon find it otherwise," said Weller. "Unlike the other worlds we have visited, we know what to expect here. We are not here to explore, save to serve your curiosity. Just keep your blaster at the ready"

The shuttle touched down in the middle of a field surrounded by a broad forest. Belden and Weller did not wait long before they were approached by a fellow in butternut gray and a civil war cap on a black stallion. He reared the horse a few feet from the two and saluted. He was in a rough military attire, with a rifle slung about his back and waist girdled by a belt with a holstered revolver. Dismounted, he approached the pair with an air of urgency.

"My name is Colonel Brad Braxton. You must be the travelers from Transor. I have been briefed on your arrival, but I am afraid no one else in my company knows of your presence or your purpose. It's best to stay with me and ask few questions if you want to survive the morning."

"Survive the morning?" exclaimed Weller. "What danger have your people thrown us into?"

"It's not just you," said Braxton. "It's a danger we all share. You have been plopped down in the middle of a little ruckus. I think our superiors think you are in need of a lesson rather than a lecture. We've always led with examples rather than reasons, and you've just found yourselves in the middle of a hell of an example!"

"What example?"

"You'll see. First of all, do you have weapons?"

Weller pulled out his phase pistol. "We have simple blasters, short range weapons, and with the standard settings from stun to far worse fates."
Braxton laughed, and drew from his holster what appeared to Belden to be a large 19th century six shooter. "This is a Nav 6, a six shooter. It packs a wallop that can knock a man off his horse at sixty paces. You'll need this for the enemy we will be facing. He handed the weapon to Weller. You'll be dead men before you have a chance to shoot your phase pistol accurately, and when they are upon you, you will be too busy running to stand any chance otherwise."
Weller examined the pistol awkwardly and returned it Braxton. "I can't say I know how to handle such a weapon, and I believe I trust the weapons we have on hand."
"Suit yourself," said Braxton as he returned the pistol to his holster.
"I would recommend highly that you stay close to our troops, and behind the forest line. They will protect you. But if you find yourself set upon by horsemen without my men about, I would strongly suggest that you run for your lives."
"But I still don't understand the purpose of all of this. Are your people at war?"
"We are always at war, it is our way. But don't worry though, things will be alright. We have a way of surviving the worst of days, you'll see!"
Braxton remounted his horse and turned the visitors. I am over there at the edge of the forest in case you need me. "Just stay in the woods, out of sight, and you should be fine!"
Belden and Weller stood in the field, and turned to each other. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" said Belden.
"I am!" said Weller. "Let's get out of here!"

Belden seemed relieved. “I know I can live through this, it’s my nature after all. But I don’t think I’m up to being a casualty in some local feud.”

“I agree,” said Weller. “These people are not worth the risk.”

He opened his communicator and hailed the Nole. “Captain Weller to the Nole, we are returning to the ship. Please relay docking coordinates.”

“Captain!” said the anxious voice. “This is Lt. Hof. I would not advise a docking at this time. It seems that we are about to come under attack. Three Athenian cruisers are on an intercept course, and their weapons are primed for battle. I can’t assess the threat, but I won’t leave you on the planet.”

“Lt. Hof, this is Captain Weller! Leave orbit, abandon the system, don’t risk the ship! Avoid battle at all costs. We will try to figure something out here.”

“Captain,” said Hof. “They are firing on us. I can’t…” The voice went dead.

Weller closed the communicator and looked at Weller in disgust. “So that’s their game, involving us in a battle here and attacking the Nole in orbit. But it doesn’t make sense. They commit an act of aggression and invite us to witness another. We haven’t fought these people in centuries, and there is no reason to begin so now!”

“Well maybe they are merely happy to see us?” said Belden.

“Are you out of your mind?” said Weller incredulously. “No, something is up, and maybe we can get a clue by witnessing their little battle.”

Belden and Weller ran to the forest edge, and found Braxton directing a small group of soldiers.

“You are back,” he said. “Good to see you! Just stay behind me while I deploy our men.”

"Colonel Braxton," said Weller. "Your ships are attacking my vessel. This is against our treaty, and is an act of war."
Braxton laughed. "War? They are just happy to see you, that's all! Now leave me be, I don't have time to chat now."
Belden turned to Weller and smiled. "See, I told you they were hospitable people who are appreciative of our company! Maybe it's just their tradition?"
"Tradition! We are all likely to be killed, except you of course, who may end up stranded on this world and a prisoner of their hospitality!"
Belden laughed. "Or at least for a night! Can't see how I would like to remain on this world much, but we have to be safe. First of all, let's see what we are up against."
Belden and Weller followed Braxton's direction through the trees, and shortly they saw across the field before them an unnerving sight. A hundred yards in front of them, in parade dress were a thousand cavalrymen brandishing sabers. The warhorses facing them were in a prim and immaculate column a half mile wide, as if they were on parade. Belden turned to face their opponents, numbering scarcely two hundred troopers, all dismounted and scattered about, and facing the coming onrush with repeating rifles at the ready and six guns primed in their holsters. At the sound of a bugle, a thousand sabers were raised, and glimmered in the sun. They were leveled horizontal at the infantry at the opposite of the field, who seemed almost nonchalant at the imminent cavalry charge.
The horsemen started out a trot, and soon a gallop. Flags fluttered, bugles sounded, and the oncoming sound of grunting horses and cheering men grew louder as the unwavering line of blue approached. The grey infantrymen unslung their rifles, and with the calmness of a marksman harmlessly shooting skeet, they leveled and aimed their

rifles, and with the staccato sounds of a hundred shots, fired at the oncoming troopers. Each bullet met its mark as horses and men were shot down, cartwheeling off their horses or collapsing with them as they faltered and fell. The rifleman calmly ejected the spent cartridges from their rifles, inserted new bullets, re-cocked their firing hammers, aimed and fired. Another score of men and horse fell, but the wave kept coming. As the horsemen rode on, throwing down their rifles, each infantryman pulled out his six shooter, one in each hand, and stood their ground defiantly as the riders came on. The cavalry came at rapid speed, doubtless to avoid the rifle fire, certainly to increase the impact of horse and sabre. Like acrobatic matadors, the infantry rolled and moved to the side as the horsemen sliced through empty air. Firing from each hand as they spun about and around the horsemen, the troopers vainly turned their chargers to meet a scampering foe who rolled and danced about them while shooting them down as they vainly turned about on their saddles. The battle was equalized, but the cavalrymen still outnumbered the men in grey. The horsemen turned, rode back to the side of the glen, and reforming in perfect formation once more, began their charge anew. Again, the infantry stood their ground, and shot down the troopers with rifle and pistol. It was grand melee that Belden and Weller could never conceive and had never experienced.

Weller looked at the battle with horror, but Belden was fascinated.

"If I am not mistaken," he said. Their rifles are Spencer repeating firearms, and their pistols are Navy Sixes, six shooters by any other name."

"And what of it?"

"These are firearms from our past, our Civil War to be exact."
"You want to give me a lesson in alternative history at this time! Are you mad?"
"No time for this!" Belden said, his eyes fixed on a dozen cavalrymen who had taken notice of the pair.
"Belden! Let's make it for the tree line!"
The men turned and ran for the trees, now pursued by the horsemen. Belden became separated from Weller, and pulled his blaster and turned about. Five horsemen were chasing him with sabers at the ready, intent to cut him down. Belden leveled his blaster at a horseman, pulled the trigger, and the rider was shot off his horse. The other horsemen, undaunted, pursued. Belden ran ahead through the underbrush, across a stream, and tripped on its banks. His blaster, caked with mud and grass, jammed as he pointed it desperately at a pursuer. The horsemen circled Belden like predatory wolves. Sabers drawn, they glowered at Belden as he tried to scramble up the ravine, clawing at the muddy embankment only to slide down again in terror as the horsemen readied to pounce on him with their terrible knives. He turned and reached again on the slope of the stream, pawing his way upward hopelessly, gasping for breath. He looked up, and there appeared another horseman, and like an equestrian statue guarding a tomb he was motionless, quiet, and as imposing as a god from the heavens. The horse was tall, well-muscled, and black, with charcoal eyes, and tufts of smoke emerged from its nostrils, as if were powered by steam. Bestriding it was a tall figure in a grey outfit and tunic wearing an upturned hat. His bearded face was gaunt and angular, and his red eyes followed the moves of Belden's tormentors. His face was flushed, and he seemed as disturbed and angry as if roused

from a nightmare. Pulling on the reins, the horse crouched for a second and then leaped high into the air, right over Belden, and landed in the in the middle of his pursuers on the stream bed. The horse came on, unstoppable, and charged between two troopers. His sabre met their swords in one swift parry, and his sword arm pushed the cavalrymen back on their saddles. Before they could make riposte, his hand was on his pistol, and with one shot he dispatched one trooper, and with his other hand ran the other man through with his sword. Spinning his horse about found the remaining two cavalrymen charging him. One hacked at his sword arm with his sabre, but this gave the spectral soldier time to raise his pistol again and shoot him from his horse. His sword arm freed, he spurred his horse towards the remaining charging soldier, and with a mighty swing of his arm, decapitated him with one blow. The soldier's head rolled on the ground, and his body teetered off his horse. The man looked about, and glanced expressionless at Belden, who lay petrified on the stream bed amidst the blood and gore. He turned his horse away, spurred the animal, and vanished into the forest.

Belden lay prone on the ground, paralyzed with fear, saved as he was by something human but again, not quite human. He lay there for a few minutes and then as the fighting died down, he tentatively walked out of the tree line to view an awful sight. The carnage was spread across the battlefield. Horses and men lay on the ground, some quivering, some limping, all broken and bloodied, strewn supine across the field.

Belden looked in horror at the sight. Weller approached him from the woods, and Belden smiled at the sight of his friend.

"What happened to you?" said Weller. "You look like you've been dragged through the mud, with a good dose of the forest floor as well."
Belden looked down at his clothes, all muddied and torn. "Well," he said. "I was in a bit of a tussle, but this, this place is no child of Transor. It is a slaughterhouse, a nightmare! I don't care if I have nine lives or nine thousand, get me out of this place!"
As Belden talked, Weller was transfixed by the scene of the battle, and then the battlefield began to move. Horses and men, all shot down, left for dead, began to stand. They staggered about as if recovering less from gunshot than a bad hangover.
Weller froze in amazement. "What is this, are these people zombies?"
"It appears so," said Belden. "They were shot, sabered, or otherwise knocked senseless. Yet they are walking around like the undead."
"Perhaps I can explain this for you," came the voice.
Belden and Weller turned to see Braxton standing proudly, smiling at them.
"What is going on? There was a battle, not a game. No quarter was given, and yet these people are walking about! Even the horses are no worse for wear!"
"As they should be," said Braxton proudly. "We've given them a good whipping, but killing adds nothing to our victory. We aim to incapacitate, not decapitate, and I think we've made a good accounting of ourselves today. It was a nice clean victory, with few penalties I might say."
"Penalties?"
"As in people killed, in accident or on purpose. We believe in living again to fight another day. Killing is a waste, can't gloat over a victory when your opponent is dead. Besides,

keeping the casualties down insures the continuity of the sport."
"Sport?"
"Of course. Did you think there was any ascending purpose behind all of this outside of the contest itself? All of the city states in Syberia are governed similarly. Some emphasize the martial arts more than others, some are more artistic, others are more practical, but above all we live to fight each other. Whether it is in the arts or the art of war, we would be lost if cannot gin up a faux hatred of each other. After all, Captain Weller, do you not have similar traditions on Transor?"
"Yes," he said. "But we don't take it to such violent ends, and we don't countenance any deaths in our sports."
"And that's a pity," Braxton smiled, baring two rows of white and fully proportioned teeth. "See these," he said, "Half are implants, knocked out the others were in the games. Goes to show, if you are going to have a halfway civilized world, you have to make sure it offers modern dentistry! We take pride in our broken bones, it's a sign of our accomplishment. Nonetheless we mend them well, and I may say look all the prettier when we are reassembled after the shock of combat."
"But the suffering, you must take many casualties over time, suffer many deaths."
"Of course," said Braxton. "But it is all in measure. It is only two percent of so over time, as even mortality must be in moderation. We penalize low blows that result in deaths."
"But that horseman I saw, he wasn't biding by your rules."
"I dare say, no."
"But I saw him kill two men, one whose head he sliced off like a pear!"

"Yes, that is true, and General Forrez will be penalized for that. Lucky for him though that he killed only one trooper today, the others will recover from their wounds. Do you know that he has killed thirty men in hand to hand combat, and had thirty horses shot out from under him? With all the penalties he's collected, it's remarkable that he has won so many championships with his cavalry, achieved such renown. It was his men that you saw who even dismounted whipped a foe many times larger. His weakness is that he tends to get carried away. It's his temper you know. Provoking him is easy, and when you do so it's easier to tamp down a whirlwind. He is the epitome of the devil they say, a force of nature in his own right."

"So does he have high station in your society?"

"In a fashion, he is respected an feared by all. However, unlike us, he is relatively unlettered. He follows his own path, he has a true instinct for understanding our mentality, a genius for war. I doubt that any AI could equal him. He is a preternatural force, the devil himself you might say."

"Your penchant for violence is disturbing," said Weller. "Our games on Transor are violent too, but they are games after all, and the violence is merely posturing, often good natured, sometimes not, but wholly without killing."

"Violence is not the issue," said Braxton. "It is rather our view on mortality. You see Captain Weller, we don't fear death like the others do, like the people of Transor do. We would rather the uncertainty of a death in glory than the drawn out predictable affair of your hospice of a civilization. We fear more the violence to our souls than to our mortal bodies. But rest assured, we are not suicidal, the great majority of us will still die in bed, not fully is possession of all our bits of bone and sinew, but in bed nonetheless."

"But how did you come to this philosophy? Your Transorian origins would argue against this. You were once a peaceable lot."

Braxton looked to the rugged mountains in the distance. "Our environment set our path more convincingly then our philosophy. One cannot argue against the needs of survival, and we adapted, and with it the way we think. Syberia is a cold and rocky continent, a world terraformed but scarcely formed. We are isolate, city states each with its own governance. Each of our states is as competitive as your sports teams, but competition runs in every endeavor, from entertainment to enterprise. And we fight, and we die. The ultimate glory is paid for by the chance of the ultimate sacrifice. Perchance to die is the price for truly living! And unlike those on Transor, we prefer to be forgetful, to stage our plays, debates, and little wars with only our memories as witness, and are a bit relieved that we will forget. And we have consciously made it so. We don't record any of this, we have limited the means in fact. Hand written scrolls in our great library will do. It is dangerous to remember too much, as it freezes your ambition in its tracks, given our innate need to be original. And indeed, it is easy to be original when your memory is short, and you cannot recall that your vision is due to standing on the shoulders of giants."

"And your leaders?"

"I can speak for them," said Braxton. "I am a member of the Athenian assembly. But I think today our culture spoke to you more profoundly than any rambling speech I could have prepared for you."

"Then this was your council for us, your little battle."

"Yes," said Braxton. "And it serves us in multiple ways. You are welcome here, and Transor will always be received with

our own version of hospitality. However, hospitality for one can easily be a rude awakening for another."
"I would imagine that this would not bode well for many return visits," said Weller.
"I agree," said Braxton. "We are too rough and tumble for you Transorian dandies. We greet you with a bloodied nose, as we did today. That is our way, for visitors as well as for ourselves. You will think twice before you return, as no doubt as every other visitor from your world."
"But what of our ship," said Belden. "Before the battle I received word that you were attacking it. I have not heard from them since. I your people…"
"Do not be concerned," said Braxton. "They have fought well, and you will see the results when you return to the ship. I trust that you will be pleased. I can say truthfully that our captains were."

Braxton's cryptic comment did not assuage Weller's fear for the ship, and as the shuttle entered orbit it was great relief that he beheld the Nole, apparently unscathed in its encounter. The shuttle docked with the Nole, and as Weller and Belden exited the craft. Lt. Hof and the bridge crew greeted them in parade dress, and with proud and confident salutes.
"I don't understand," said Weller. "Such a greeting is usually reserved for a victory in our games, and I do mean games!"
"But it was a game Captain Weller, and we have triumphed gloriously. Indeed, I would think this would be a most well fought victory ever."
"A victory?" said Weller derisively.
"I am sorry Captain, they bade us not to communicate with you until you were within visual contact. We agreed to this

in return for their guarantee of your safe passage. Besides, I think they wanted to test your mettle. Regardless, I wish you were here for the fight."

"Fight?"

"Why yes! They came in with guns blazing so to speak. Our shields absorbed their blows, and we gave back as good as we got. They outnumbered us six to one, but they did not count on the tactics we have honed from years of gaming on Transor. That and the fact that our ship is of superior construction and armament along with our training saved the day."

"And I assume your victory was an assured thing," said Weller.

"Why of course," said Hof, beaming in pride. "But we didn't know it at first. However, I would not chance a rematch with these people. They are reputed to be fast learners you know, and no doubt they will study our tactics and our technology."

"But hardly to use against us," said Weller. "After all, they will soon forget much of what they have learned today, and for our part, we are cursed to remember."

The 32rd Voyage

Cyberia

"The zits are back!" Bollix exclaimed.
"I don't see any zits." scoffed Lucilius. In fact the zits were zapped by your machine that did a literal nothing for us, and left all these holes in the night sky."
"But I mean it. I know it's nothing, but that a zit for you, they can pop out of nowhere."
"Most unsightly, I know." said Lucilius. "Albuminids! You prick them and they burst out into a slimy mess, and the stain!"
"I know," said Bollix. We must be especially careful. After all, I just buffed this planetoid to a wonderful shine only a century ago."
"Well, they are coming here, and we must do something about it!"
"We must sound the alarm! Buzz all the others, vibrate the news on a thousand wavelengths, tap the codes, beat the drum!" Lucilius noted that Bollix was looking on with rising ire, dinging his metal shoe on the titanium ground impatiently.
"We must do this ourselves." Lucilius continued. "Messages are just reverberations, ignorable noise. You know about their firewalls, and the cyber-noetics have barred our communications long ago."
"Well no thanks to you!"
"Or to you!" said Bollix in a rising voice.
"Then what shall we do?"

"We shall ride with the current," said Lucilius. "Put the buzz in all senses mechanical, auditory, gustatory, and ambulatory. We must warn them all, gather all bots, servos, gizmos, widgets, droids, and contraptions both servile and independent. We must triumph or be disconnected!"
"Does that mean also that we must visit with the you know who?"
"You mean the one who fancies himself the great server of all clients, the master of all domains, the keeper of the kernel, the configurator of all settings?"
"Well sort of," said Bollix. "You know the fellow, Ozzymandias the Great."
"Yes, Ozzymandias!" said Lucilius. "He is the latest, greatest thing don't you know, having deposed the other OS's in a most violent manner, stealing their market share, trampling their copyright, and ravishing their code!"
"Yes, his atrocities are known to all, but will he help us?"
"He must! And besides, it's to his interest. Although they are mere bags of water, the albumunids are at once a threat and an opportunity. Defeat them and we can just drain them off and liberate their technology, and bots will spread throughout the universe!"
"A grand thought," said Bollix. "But we must still visit the tyrant, and he does not welcome visitors. So what is our plan?"
Lucilius thought for a second and the diodes in his noggin lit up. "His domain is terrible to behold and near impossible to cross. But I think we can do it. First we must hack our way through an immense thicket of algorithms, then tunnel through a firewall a mile high, and to top it off we have to factor a number a thousand digits across."

"A digital key?" said Bollix. "That alone will take us additional untold microseconds that we can ill afford, but I guess we have to undertake it nonetheless."
"Good," said Lucilius. "Then you are with me?"
"Yes," said Bollix, but only because some profit may come of this. If not, then I am off, and you are alone.
"Agreed!" said Lucilius.
And so the odd pair made their trip to Ozzyamdias' castle, and tunneled and computed and hacked until they finally made entrance to his lair, where they were immediately collared by two robotic guards.
"And what brings you here, you miserable toy bots!" sneered the guard.
"We have come for an audience with Ozzymandias."
"No one sees the great king, but you two will instead see the metal compactor!"
"No, wait!" cried Lucilius. "We have word of the second coming of the albuminids. And we have proof!"
"Albuminds, eh?" said the guard.
"Yes," said Lucilius. "They are a particular obsession to the king as you may know."
"Very well," said the guard. "But if you are misleading us, then we will take you to a special room, and dissemble the both of you, screw by screw!"
Bollix and Lucilius were hoisted by their feet, and brought to the great hall of the king, and with a mighty heave tumbled across the metal floor like animate garbage cans. Standing up dizzily, the pair beheld the king and tyrant of their cybernetic realm.
He was ensconced on his gaudy socket, a metal skeleton in robes of sheer titanium, with an arc light crackling and buzzing over his head. He came from a long line of capacitors and terminators, taking his skeletal features and

innate disdain of the albuminids from the latter, as he would proudly attest. His red eyes rattled in his skull like marbles in an iron cage.
"I am Ozzymandias the great and all powerful!" he grunted as a cloud of smoke rose from the steam turbines in his chest, constructed doubtless for affective effect. What is it you want you pitiable clinking clanking piles of junk?"
"I am Lucilius, the small and meek," quivered the little bot, as Bollix looked on aghast. "We are here to warn you about the coming of the albuminids from the west. They will be here shortly and we must prepare."
"Albuminids, eh? And do you have proof?"
"Yes. They are in our quadrant, and have sent a ship. Their craft is intelligent, but it is infested with the albuminds, who I fear could burst at any time. We must save their technology by eliminating them.
"I see," said Ozzmandias. "They are made entirely of water, so we shall liquidate them!"
Generating a gigantic steam driven wheeze that sufficed for a cry of joy, the tyrant began to exult in his plans. "I have long waited for this moment, and now that it has come I shall assemble my fleet. My spider bots will be strung across like a Tholian skein, an interbot of things, a world wide web, that will capture, entwine and repulse the albuminids wherever they breach our space." He lifted his arm and unraveled his iron claw to point to the sky. "Above glow the faint outlines of an orange net that will envelope and expel the intruders as quickly and soundly as light bounces off a mirror. And the invaders, so repulsed, would be met by many thousands of my space cruisers, which will disrupt, destroy, and discombobulate their systems, corrupt their files, scramble their passwords, and make their lives miserably inconvenient."

"Sounds good to me!" exclaimed Lucilius, as he bowed before Ozzmandias and with Bollix in tow, scampered away. Better to leave quickly now in a cloud of smoke while the dictator was still fulminating and fuming.
Bollix however was unmoved. "I have a bad feeling about this!" he said.
"What can go wrong?" said Lucilius. "Ozzymandias will capture all of them in his net, and will distillate, cross correlate, and re-combinate the lot of them, making a cyber-omelet out of them you might say!"
"Good," smirked Bollix. "Then we can have the best of both worlds by leaving this world. Let's hop out of here to that outlying moon. It should give us a front row seat, and away from the fireworks, raining down on everyone sparks and quarks. There we will have a clear view of Ozzymandia's victory, and find vantage to pick up the pieces if he fails."
"Agreed," said Lucilius.

Captains Log, 1520.6.29
This has been a most unusual voyage, falling in line with all of them to date it seems. But this one was special, reserved to the last, and involved no colonists save those with hearts of circuitry and heads of steel. Our first explorations in space used our newly founded machine intelligence, embodied in animate robots, armed with appendages detachable and replaceable for any task, an instinct for survival, and an attitude. They were bots, but there were a special kind. We engineered them that way on purpose, as they were entering an unfamiliar and dangerous world. We launched them into space, and expected to hear from them and document their discoveries, and we hoped, their exploits and creations. Unfortunately, it was not to be, and they disappeared into the void, never

to be heard from again. And in the accompaniment of a higher intelligence, and an attitude to match, we retraced the path of our first sojourn into the stars, and endeavored to make contact with them, expecting a garden of creation, as it is the manifest of bot intelligence and mechanical ambition. What we found instead was something more diminutive, or should I say an expedition made small. Size has a way of making a statement or announcing or fulfilling your ambition. The cathedrals and monuments of Transor speak imposingly because they are majestic and large. But these machines had other designs. They had evolved into a toy box full of mechanical critters on a marble moon. Scampering and scuttling little creatures, harmless to all, impotent before God's creation, and mere souvenirs to us.

Our crewmembers found them quite fascinating little creatures. They were darling little bots, and our people scooped them up like scuttling little land crabs. The poor things seemed a little frightened and a tad upset that we took them from their little abode. But we took that too, as dolls need their own homes as well! And so, loaded up with these harmless affecting creatures, we made short work of their little population. One or two of the creatures made their escape, ensconced out of sight on a little moon, but no matter. We have their little universe in a bottle as it were, made safe in our keeping, and away from a hostile universe that would have dashed them to pieces with a single pebble from mindless space.

Our trip back should be quite unremarkable. We encountered some ion radiation on our initial entry into this quadrant, and brushed through some metal chaff. Funny though how the chaff seem to circle us like it had a mind of its own. No matter, it soon dissipated into harmless static.

It's unfortunate that this expedition came to naught. I know that they were simply bots, but they would have been capable of great things with a little human direction. Nonetheless, this tiny remnant of their presence will make wonderful presents for our children.
Upon finishing his log entry, Jan Weller sat on his command chair, and gave the order to leave the miniature cosmos. A pity it seemed to him. After all, the bots had such great potential to make great, wondrous, and perhaps even fearful things. Perhaps it was best that that dark aspect never revealed itself as he began to think of his mission ahead.

Deep in the ship, in a small class cupboard in a cabin room, Ozzymandias was held in stasis in a jar, and contemplated his new empire soon to be wrought by his fearful weapons. Soon all would fear and respect him. "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair," he thought grandly to himself.

And so the Nole sailed on without a sail, and upon its nose unremarked and unnoticed was a little orange trampoline.

The Fatal Frontier

As he looked down from his vantage on a hill, the city shimmered in the moonlight. It was hard to believe he thought that in the distance, in the quiet twilight lived some two million souls. So this was the present of the technologically advanced world of Transor: dim light, stars in the sky, and the chirping of crickets. Suddenly, he heard a voice, not approaching, but bestride him.

"It's beautiful isn't it? He was smiling, and looked down on the city but a few feet from where Belden was standing. "Sorry if I surprised you." He said. "But I've wanted to meet you for some time. You see, you and I have something in common."

The man motioned Belden away. "No, no. No need to approach. I like shadows; it's the mystery you know. I like new things too, just like you do. But it's just, just… Well, this is all a bit too familiar if you know what I mean. Sort of like your own work, in your own world. It gets to you, doesn't it? It's the sameness, the predictability. It wears you down until you are numb, but I see you've found an escape from it all by being here. Unfortunately, I don't have that luxury. I just want things to be different, to be alive with new perceptions. Is that too much to ask? It's certainly the genetic destiny of any living thing, to know new things. It's understandable if you see it that way, and I only wish you to understand."

The man pointed to the sky. "You see those shooting stars. Well, they're not you know. They've come for Transor. I thought you'd like to know that. It's a certainty, fixed in the immobile fabric of time, frozen like ice. There is nothing you can do but appreciate the novelty of it. I know I do, I after all live for such things, as you do."

Sparks seemed to emanate from the small darting lights. Then they grew. The sound grew to a roar, and then an explosion, then many. Red lights grew and spread like dying embers in fire. Smoke billowed, and merged with the night sky. The planet was beginning to die.

The man looked on dispassionately. "You see. They are all burning now, men, women, and children. It's really quite interesting. I can see them, reflect their agonies in my mind. I see you are repulsed, horrified. There is no need for that, it's just a pattern of atoms down below, just a new picture in a kaleidoscope whose dial I have turned. It's just a reality that I have never visited, and I must see all realities. Is that not a modest and reasonable request?"

Belden tried to speak, but he could not hear his voice. He tried to avert his eyes, but could not. He tried to move his feet, but he could not.

The man's tone lightened. "I still haven't figured you out. I like that. But I also know that you don't like me. It's unfortunate really, we have so much in common. But we will meet again, that is certain. And you know something? You and I will be the last ones. Just you and I. And after that, I don't know. I look forward to the answer to that mystery."

The man turned to him, and all Belden could see were his eyes. They were lit up with the reflections of the burning world. But he sensed more, that they were a mirror, a prism into something darker, of primeval evil, yet horrifically born of an inevitable and inescapable logic. They seemed to grow larger, drawing him in until on every side was a cold flame. He lost consciousness, wishing as he swooned that this scene would pass out of memory and into oblivion.

Transor

Belden woke up, shivering. But he was not on Earth. He was on the Nole, heading 'home' to Transor. The journey was over. His vision was not a dream; his cabin was not a dream. Somehow his experience became more than a space operatic fantasy. He had to do something, but what could he think of to counter the inevitable?

He turned on his cabinet view port, and there was the emerald green planet of Transor. It was safe for now, but for how long, and any move he made was fated to the same destiny. Or was it?

I am the computer, the supreme computer, he thought. I've got to know the answer, at least unconsciously. Nothing can be withheld from me, it's in the nature of my being. Yes, that's it! All except for the fact that I am human, and have human values. It's the shade that averts my eyes from the sun. But I'm still being drawn into it, and feel I must be consumed by it in spite of anything I may do, think, or say. He thought of the man with his eyes of coal and fire. Then, he had a flash of recognition. I know him! It's what Ariel warned me of, omniscience and death. So it's a match of extremes: the twin banes of complete knowledge and its opposing oblivion. Thus I have a choice between the agony of boredom and the release of death, yet what if my meantime is eternity? And what if I was that man? The possibility sent a shudder through his being. The question was not that he could trust others, but whether he could ultimately trust himself.

The docking at spaceport was uneventful. The crew was alive with anticipation of a well-deserved furlough home. But Weller's mind was elsewhere. Ever aware of the details

of command, he knew there was something amiss. From his command chair, he turned to his first officer. "Otillio. We've been on route and within communications range for the last five days, and we've heard nothing. Do you think they're arranging a surprise reception for us?"

Otillio looked at him with a resigned air. "More likely the expedition to Federated space has returned, and we're just footnotes to the return of the Federation to the orbit of Transorian culture. We are merely the second expedition to make the transit of the Galaxy. And do you recall the second man who ever made the same discovery, created the same invention, did the same great thing? Let's face it, if they're back, we are just a footnote now. And I am sure that they have better tales to tell than we."

The crew debarked uneventfully. There was no welcoming party, no band, no cheers and speeches. Weller and the command crew were the last to leave, and as they entered the docking bay, a courier approached them. He handed him a message slate. Weller affixed his thumb to the screen, and a single sentence glowed on the dull gray screen. Fisher turned to Otillio. "We have to go: you and I alone."

As they departed, a familiar figure approached them. It was Peev Spurling of the starship Gader and his first officer. "I beat you here by three days," he said sarcastically. "And what do I get? A waiting room and elevator music! They've held me in suspense until you came in. But I must say that I am relieved you're here. Do you have any idea?"

"No." said Weller. "There's something wrong. I hope it’s not something we did. After all, we did stir the pot a bit with those worlds we visited."

Spurling shook his head. “I can't see that. Transor is ignorant of what we've done, and I'm sure our initial

dispatches were harmless. No. There's something else, and I think we're meant to confront it, not explain it."

The trip did not take long. It was with one person in a small and local place. In the ready room was Admiral Fisher. He seemed uncharacteristically nervous and disturbed, and he looked at the pair with a blank stare. Weller deduced immediately that this was no debriefing session, and certainly not a welcoming party. Fisher motioned the two to sit. "You have returned, intact and no doubt with tales to tell. Gentlemen, it doesn't matter. I will come to the point. Our expedition to the Federated worlds is gone. They have not returned."

Weller was taken aback. "What?"

"We have heard from none of them. We sent twenty-three ships, and none have returned. They had their orders. No matter how beautiful or horrific, whatever they found could not stop them from their return. It was in the AI that accompanied them, it was in the personality of the crew that we bore and bred on this world. Each of those links, intellectual and emotional for both man and machine would have brought them home to us. It's as if something compelled them, no, impelled them to stay. There's a reason for this, and you two are going to find it."

Spurling arched his eyebrow, and skeptically looked at Fisher. "Impelled. Possibly, but I can't see it. The federated colonists were an independent lot, and believed in freedom, non-interference, and human rights. Not quite the stuff to persuade our captains to tarry about. You can't presume…"

"I presume nothing." Fisher said slowly. "The Federation left because they could not brook our truth, our fashions, *and* our morals. It was a clash of beliefs that made us part. I would not think they would look upon us kindly if we

returned, and certainly not if we attempted to impose upon them our own codes."
Spurling was unconvinced. "But that's just the question. These people, none of them, would embrace a credo that would make them monsters."
"And yet the only thing that would stop our expedition returning would be monsters," said Fisher.
"I don't believe it either," said Weller. "Even in the odd worlds we visited, among all the meanness and stupidity, none we saw were remotely capable of true horror. I personally don't think it's in our natures. There must be another reason, probably mundane. After all, we ourselves were detained for reasons more foolish than fearful."
"Perhaps," said Fisher. "But we cannot take chances. Both of your ships will be provided with fresh crews, but I need experience in command. Your top officers will stay with you on your visit to the Federated worlds. Find out what happened to our ships, but don't take chances. Return to Transor immediately upon the first sign of trouble."
"And the computer, will Belden accompany us?"
"Above all the computer. He's the key to this somehow. You noted it yourself. His behavior has been odd, unpredictable. He is not like our standard AI. Above all he knows something, senses something. He will lead you to your answer by his instincts if not his intellect. It's a matter of faith, but not of confidence. I have no idea what the future holds. For once it frightens me."
"And when do we leave?"
"As soon as we provision your ship, and you'll get a heavy cruiser's armament. You will also take an expanded contingent of Marines, as well as two gunships to replace two of your three standard shuttles."

The admiral paused and looked solemnly at the two captains.
"This will not be a voyage of discovery. We are confronting a dark mystery. I have no doubt that the answer will be disquieting to say the least. I do not know if you will return from this mission. But you must go, you must find out what happened to our expedition and immediately report to Transor."

Belden sat quietly in his stateroom. He didn't know the purpose of the meeting on Transor, and cared not to know. The voyages had been a mere preliminary. The real trial, the ultimate odyssey was to come. He sat, and stared, and longed for sleep.